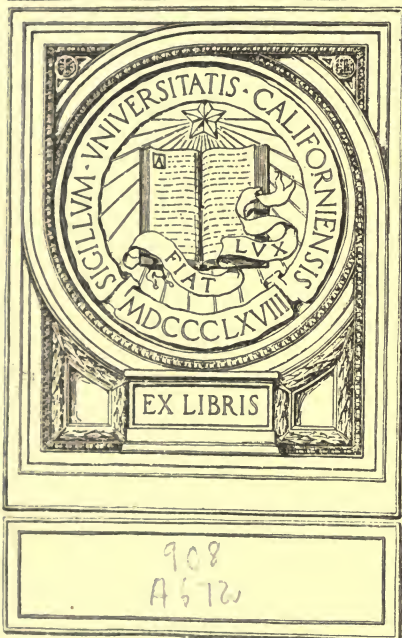
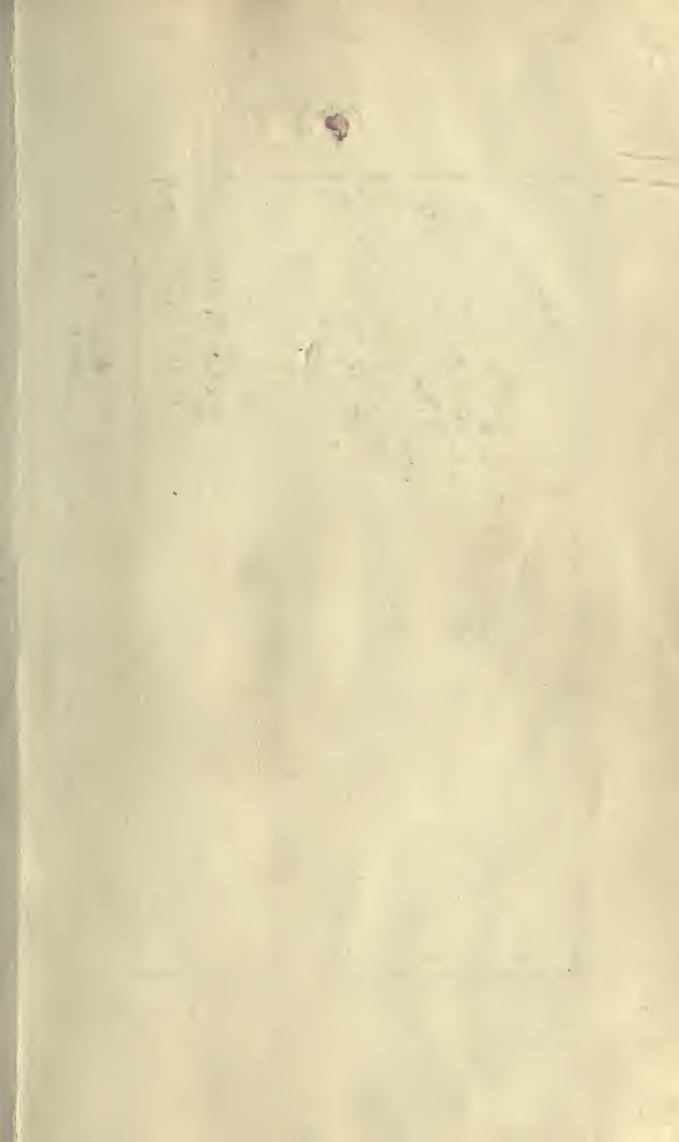




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*ABOUT THE THEATRE*



# ABOUT THE THEATRE

*ESSAYS AND STUDIES*



BY

WILLIAM ARCHER

AUTHOR OF "ENGLISH DRAMATISTS OF TO-DAY," ETC.

London

T FISHER UNWIN

26 PATERNOSTER SQUARE

MDCCCLXXXVI 1886

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## PREFATORY NOTE.



THE greater part of the first paper in this volume is hitherto unpublished, but some portions of it have appeared in the *Theatre* and other magazines. The second essay is reprinted from the *Westminster Review*; the third from the *Nineteenth Century*; the fourth and tenth from the *Dramatic Review*; the fifth, sixth, and eighth from *Time*; the seventh from the *National Review*; and the ninth from the *Magazine of Music*. To the editors of these periodicals I beg to express my thanks for their courteous sanction of this republication. All the papers, I may add, have been carefully revised, and some in a measure re-written.

W. A.

2011/11/15



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## ARE WE ADVANCING?

(1882-1886.)

IN seeking to estimate progress, material, moral, or artistic, we must first answer two questions which may be summed up in the words Whence? and Whither? Unless we exactly know our starting-point, and have clearly ascertained the direction, at least, in which our goal is to be sought, movement, not progress, is the most that we can prove. If we have not made up our minds whether our destination be New York, or Melbourne, or Valparaiso, our ship may do her fifteen knots an hour and yet we shall have made no progress whatever. Her speed, in fact, may merely be prolonging the voyage or hastening a catastrophe.

*Whence and  
whither?*

The destination, the goal, or, in other words, the ideal of the drama, is a subject of unceasing controversy. Shall we steer for Realism or for Idealism, for culture or merely for amusement?

*Many men.  
many minds.*

Some would have us reverse the engines, put on full speed astern, and try back to the spacious times of great Elizabeth. Others are for ploughing steadily forward in the good old course laid down by Scribe. Some would put the helm a-starboard and make for rhythmic regions of Neo-Shakespeareanism; others would fain deviate in the opposite direction, eschewing poetry for photography. Browningism has its adherents; so has Zolaism; even Ibsen, in these latter days, is the god of a few fanatics. The great majority, bound to no sect or clique, is ready to dash off towards any point of the compass which promises pastime — “Zeitvertreib” — whether in the form of laughter or of excitement. Progress, then, means a score of different things to a score of different factions; at which point of view are we to take our stand in the present inquiry?

*The questions  
proposed.*

I propose to adopt, for the nonce, a broad definition of progress. Is the theatre attracting, and does it deserve to attract, more and more attention from the educated and thoughtful portion of the community? If it is, it matters little in what direction the development is taking place; indeed it is almost certain to manifest itself in several

directions at once. Where there is life there is hope; and when the better minds of a nation are occupying themselves sympathetically with the drama of the day, I think we may take it as a sign of more or less healthy vitality.

The period I propose to review is short, but sufficiently eventful to be instructive. About four years ago I published a collection of essays,<sup>1</sup> in which I attempted a bird's-eye view of the English theatre as it then existed. "The Romany Rye," first presented on the 10th of June, 1882, was the latest production which came within my ken, and this may serve to date the volume. Over these four years, then, I wish to cast a rapid glance, noting a few of their salient features in so far as they bear upon the question above stated: *Is the theatre attracting, and does it deserve to attract, more and more attention from the educated and thoughtful portion of the community?*

*The period covered.*

We have here two separate inquiries, one simple, the other difficult; one a question of fact, the other a question of opinion. The question of fact necessarily comes first.

That the theatre is attracting more and more attention may almost be called a matter

(i) *The question of fact: increasing vogue of the stage.*

<sup>1</sup> "English Dramatists of To-day." London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, and Rivington. 1882.

*The upper ten.*

of common knowledge. The proofs meet us on every hand. Four years ago the production of a novelty at the Lyceum was a social event of some magnitude, but in this respect no other theatre could for a moment vie with Mr. Irving's. Now, while a Lyceum first-night has grown into a solemn function which peers, millionaires, and honourable women intrigue to see, and see not, two or three other theatres may almost be said to rival the home of the poetic drama in the matter of social vogue. The superior attraction of the theatre is certainly one reason, though not the only one, for the decline of Italian opera. The Prince of Wales, never remiss as a theatre-goer, has become an assiduous first-nighter, and many leaders of society are as devoted amateurs of the play-house as of the racecourse. The fact, however, that the drama holds a place beside Goodwood and Redcar in the affections of the British barbarian—"something cheaper than his horse, a little lower than his dog"—proves nothing as to its claim to rank as an element in the intellectual life of the nation. But the world of art and letters is setting towards the theatre as strongly as the world of fashion. Statesmen, painters and poets, men of law, men of science, soldiers and

divines, all follow with more or less attention the movements of things theatrical. The theatre is now a stock topic of discussion in intellectual circles in which, a few years ago, the prize-ring was scarcely more loftily ignored. Not only "le monde où l'on s'amuse," but "le monde où l'on s'ennuie," has become more or less stage-struck. The Universities no longer taboo, but rather encourage, the acted drama. Cambridge has not as yet officially countenanced performances in the vernacular; but at Oxford, only the other day, the Vice-Chancellor graced by his presence the opening of a new theatre, and listened to a prologue written by a proctor! Mr. Gladstone's presence at the play *Premiers,* on one memorable, but by no means isolated, occasion, has been blazoned by his opponents to all the world. Lord Salisbury was among the brilliant company who assembled to bid farewell to the Bancrofts on their retirement from management. Lord Tennyson has added to his *Poets,* poetical plays a drama in prose, written specially for stage representation. Strenuous efforts are being made to place Mr. Browning's tragedies on the list of living plays, and even "The Cenci" is soon to be attempted on the stage—so completely have men of culture abandoned the theory that the highest drama



*and Prophets.*

should be read, not acted. Mr. Ruskin, Mr. Matthew Arnold, and Lord Lytton have all appeared as dramatic critics in their several ways, and even Lord Wolseley has been induced to blow a blast on the trumpet of Mr.

*The press and the stage.*

Augustus Harris. Still more significant is the treatment accorded to theatrical matters by the leading periodicals of the day. Four years ago I stated, in the first of the aforesaid essays, that "the higher criticism despised and ignored" the theatre, meaning by "the higher criticism" that of the leading reviews, monthly or quarterly. The statement passed unchallenged, and was then literally accurate; repeated now it would be absolutely false. Almost without exception the serious magazines take frequent cognizance of the acted drama. Several of them scarcely ever appear without one or two theatrical articles. Before long, perhaps, we shall have some English review imitating the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, and chronicling, issue by issue, the important events of the stage. Already the two most widely read of weekly papers—*Punch* and the *Saturday Review*—may almost be called theatrical journals, so minute is the attention they devote to dramatic doings. There cannot be a more convincing proof of the growth of



public interest in the theatre. "A paper's laws a paper's patrons give," and when we find *Punch* and the *Saturday Review* treating in detail of the smallest events where a few years ago they gave only a condescending attention to the greatest, we may be sure that Englishmen all over the world no longer think these trifles despicable. It may be said that the present editor of *Punch* is himself a man of the theatre, and consequently apt to keep an alert eye on the affairs of Stageland. But, oddly enough, his predecessors in the editorial chair were each and all playwrights as well as he, and there can be no doubt that had they found an equal demand for theatrical comments they would have responded to it with equal alacrity.

It would be absurd to maintain that the theatre holds as large a place in the enlightened national consciousness of England as it holds in that of France; but it has gained ground immensely within the past four years. In Switzerland, several seasons ago, I was living at a remote "Kurort," where the supply of newspapers was very scanty. One Sunday morning the doctor of the establishment, with a face as white as bismuth, brought a number of the *Événement* which had just arrived, and

*England compared with France.*

*M. Scholl's  
little joke.*

asked if I had heard of the terrible catastrophe in Paris. He pointed to an article signed "Aurélien Scholl," and I can recall to this day the thrill of horror with which I read it. The Vaudeville, so it stated, had been burnt to the ground on the first night of a new play by Sardou. All Paris—"le tout Paris des premières"—had perished in the flames. The leaders of the Senate and of the Chamber, half the world of fashion, of art, and of letters, lay buried in the ruins. Some fifteen or twenty of the forty Immortals had proved their mortality. Almost all the newspapers appeared with blank columns, their critics and chroniclers having died at their posts. Name by name, the writer gravely set forth the list of victims in this holocaust of genius. There were one or two touches of grotesque humour, such as an account of the escape of Francisque Sarcey from the burning building; but though the taste of these episodes was execrable, the caricature was not sufficiently marked to disprove the genuineness of the report. Among the visitors at the Bath were several Parisians, who were as far as any of us from seeing through the hoax. We tried, indeed, to believe the whole affair a bad pleasantry, but there was nothing impossible about it, nothing

even improbable, and till the next day's mail brought other French and Swiss papers all was consternation and anxiety. In England—and this is my reason for mentioning the circumstance—such a hideous hoax would be impossible. The point of M. Scholl's little joke lay in the fact that in naming all the most famous names of contemporary Paris he named the very persons who were certain to be present on the first night of a play by Sardou. No such representative company has ever yet been collected within the walls of an English theatre. If an English Scholl—which heaven forbid!—should be moved to attempt a similar pleasantry, he would have to content himself with a decimation rather than a positive massacre of the intellectual world of London. Yet, if he chose the Lyceum, the Princess's, or the St. James's as the scene of his catastrophe, he might make out a tolerably appalling list of victims without reducing the matter to an absurdity; and a list which would have been laughed to scorn in 1876, and received with scepticism in 1882, might quite well pass muster in the present year of grace as by no means transgressing the limits of the probable.

So much for the matter of fact: now for the question of opinion. Does the stage deserve

— impossible  
in England.

(ii) *The question of opinion is its vogue deserved?*

this increased attention? Is it doing anything worthy the consideration of intelligent men? Or is its present vogue a mere caprice of fashion, irrational and transient?

On this point there are wide divergences of opinion. Essays on "The Theatrical Revival" and on "The Dramatic Decadence" are to be seen almost side by side in the daily, weekly, and monthly press. One writer points out by name the pioneers of the advance, while another analyzes conclusively the causes of the decline. As optimism is the inborn tendency of the race, I believe that, on the whole, the Ayes have it; but the Noes form at least a respectable minority. Let us hear one of their spokesmen, Mr. Walter Herries Pollock, a critic who, from his position, may be regarded as representing a more or less influential school of opinion.

*Mr. Pollock on  
the politico-  
theatrical  
decadence.*

In a recent number of the *National Review* (July, 1885) Mr. Pollock takes what he calls "A Glance at the Stage." It is a very short glance, yet long enough to fill his soul with despair. He sees people laughing at "The Private Secretary," and crying over "Olivia," and, as he pathetically puts it, his "criticism reels before such a result." I am not concerned to defend Mr. Wills, the poet, or Mr. Hawtrey, the humourist, Mr. Wills being no more

the one than Mr. Hawtrey is the other. If Mr. Pollock were merely critical, one would have nothing to say as to the results of his glance at the stage. Every one has a right to his opinion, even if it be that "Peril" at the Prince's was "well acted throughout." But Mr. Pollock is more than critical—he is philosophical. He traces "the decadence of English taste in stage-plays" direct to "the decadence of England's position among the nations of the world." He holds that "the love of prolonged farce on the stage is due to the prolonged tragedy of political events off the stage;" and, lest we should take this for mere persiflage, he is careful to add that he is speaking "as seriously as one may when giving no more than a glance at a serious subject." His proposition, then, falls into three parts: (a) England is in a state of national decadence; (b) the English stage is in a state of literary decadence; (c) the former phenomenon is the direct cause of the latter. Here, surely, is a theory worth serious examination. Its bland pessimism is a facer before which the optimistic criticism of the day reels. We hear so much of the dramatic revival, of the regeneration of the stage, the dignity of the drama, and so forth, that this calm assertion of what Mr. Wegg would call its decline and fall off,

explained and classified as part and parcel of the Decline and Fall Off of the British Empire, comes upon us like the news of the capture of Khartoum just as we were throwing up our caps and huzzaing over its safety.

Proposition (a) we may at once take for granted. Every one who knows anything knows that England is going to the dogs. Not to know that argues oneself a Radical, if not a Socialist. We are all agreed, then, that "political events" are a "prolonged tragedy," and can pass in mournful unanimity to Propositions (b) and (c). Now, as to this "decadence of English taste in stage-plays," one would like to know definitely when it set in. Its most deplorable symptom, we are told, is the taste for prolonged farces, for the three-act monstrosities which have expelled from the stage "the old form of farce," by which Mr. Pollock no doubt means "Betsy Baker," "The Area Belle," "The Kiss in the Dark," "Boots at the Swan," and this genus all. So far, so good; but it is important to discover at what date this debased preference began to manifest itself. Was its rise exactly coincident with Mr. Gladstone's advent to power in 1880? Or was it after any particular one of the countless catastrophes resultant from that infaust event, that

*When did it  
set in?*

the British public took to drowning its sorrows in the three-act farce? Was it after the passing of the Irish Land Act? or the surrender to the Boers? or the German annexation of New Guinea? or the defeat of one of the fortnightly Votes of Censure? Which of our hundred humiliations was it that broke the camel's back and made it morbidly eager to balance matters by splitting its sides? On these questions we await enlightenment.

Irrepressible optimism, in the meantime, suggests a doubt. Decadence or no decadence, is it certain that we are now fonder of "prolonged farces" than we were in the good old days of England's glory, when political events, as every child can tell, marched merrily along to the tune of "Rule Britannia"? We might go back to the stirring times of good Queen Bess and point out that the public of those days had a Gargantuan taste for farces not in three but in five acts. We might glance at the reign of Queen Anne when there were no Chamberlains (except Lord Chamberlains), and when the illustrious name of Churchill was a synonym for disinterested patriotism; and we might ask whether, in that age of "glorious victories," there were not produced shoals of so-called comedies which we,



*"Comedies" of  
the palmy days.*



to-day, would class alliteratively as filthy five-act farces. But such inquiries take us too far a-field. The times from which Mr. Pollock holds that we have declined and fallen off are evidently times within his own memory, doubtless the six years between 1874 and 1880, when we trod the primrose path of peace with honour, when our prestige sated even the indomitable soul of Tracy Turnerelli, when, in short, "We didn't want to fight, but, by Jingo, if we did——!" Now, what were the two plays whose gigantic success rendered this period illustrious in the annals of the drama? One was "The Pink Dominoes," a three-act farce frank and unmistakable. The other was the legendary "Our Boys," a three-act—comedy shall we say? I leave it to Mr. Pollock to decide.

*"Prolonged Farce," a pre-Gladstonian product.*

It appears, then, that the three-act farce is not wholly and solely a product of Liberal misrule. It flourished when Plancus was consul, and it is not certain that it would straightway cease to be even if Mr. Ashmead Bartlett were to become Premier. One cannot but suspect a fallacy in Mr. Pollock's argument. Is it conceivable that he has been misled by names, and that many pieces which were called comedies in the palmy days differed



from our three-act farces only in being less amusing? I submit this suggestion as a salve to the conscience of any one who, on reading Mr. Pollock's article, may have felt remorse for having laughed at "The Private Secretary" while his country was being led to destruction.

This fallacy, if it be one, has entrapped other theorists besides Mr. Pollock. Mr. Sydney Grundy, for instance, has bewailed the rise of farce and the decline of comedy in a pathetic lament over "Poor Thalia."<sup>1</sup> He too, I think, has been misled by names, and has forgotten that many of the farces of to-day would have been accepted as comedies ten, or even five, years ago; yet his argument does not repose entirely upon this ambiguity. A certain type of play, generally and conveniently described as comedy, has in these latter days fallen into decrepitude and given up the ghost. It drew its last breath on the night of Mr. and Mrs. Bancroft's retirement from the Haymarket—an event which I desire to underline as one of the most significant of the period I am reviewing. Let us look for a moment into the secret of it.

The secret, I think, lies in the exhaustion of that form of art in which the Bancrofts had made their name, to suit which they had formed

*Mr. Grundy  
on "Poor  
Thalia."*

<sup>1</sup> *Dramatic Review*, March 14, 1885.

*Moral of the  
Bancrofts'  
retirement.*

their methods, and from which they could not depart without a break in their traditions. The public would accept nothing but cup-and-saucer comedy at their hands, and yet it had lost all genuine appetite for cup-and-saucer comedy. In vain they poured fresh water on the old tea-leaves and handed round the beverage in more and more exquisite porcelain; at each brew it was found more vapid. Things were even more hopeless with regard to the coffee-and-cognac which used to be served up between-whiles by way of variety. Sardou had left off producing the proper brand. He had insisted on dabbling in theology and archæology—matters quite unfit for the tea-table. Even in “Fédora” the coffee was too bitter, the cognac too strong. Moreover, the secession of the Kendals had established an irresistible competition precisely in the emotional sphere; so that all possible influences combined to force the Bancrofts back upon their hurdy-gurdy policy—in other words, a “damnable iteration” of played-out cup-and-saucer comedies, together with the three or four classic or semi-classic pieces which could be treated by cup-and-saucer methods. A new departure became absolutely necessary, and in every new departure there is risk. Mr. Bancroft, having brought his galley safe and

well-laden into port, felt no call to venture forth again upon unknown seas. "We value your regard too highly," he told his last Haymarket audience, "to risk for a moment a fraction of its decay."

This, then, is the moral of the Bancrofts' retirement, and it is re-echoed to us from every quarter of the theatrical heavens; comedy, middle-class comedy, heart-and-coronet comedy, milk-and-moonshine comedy, baronet-and-buttermilk comedy, in short, original English comedy as licensed by the Lord Chamberlain and supplied to Mr. Gilbert's "young lady of fifteen," is as dead as Aristophanes. We hear its dirge on every hand, Mr. Pollock and Mr. Grundy being merely two mourners out of many. For my part, I neither weep for Thalia nor deplore a decadence. I hold that frank fantasy is better than sham observation, and that the public has done well in tiring of realistic furniture and conventional feelings. We are groping our way towards a comedy—or, if you prefer it, a drama—of observation, and meanwhile our old comedy is throwing off its shallow sentiment, its thin pretence of seriousness, and appearing in its true colours as frank farce. "In Chancery," "The Magistrate," "The Snowball," "The Great Pink

—decease of  
cup-and-saucer  
comedy.

Pearl," seem to me better, because more purebred, works of art, than the mongrel productions we have been accustomed to call comedies.

*Rise of melodrama—*

The decline, or rather the dissolution, of cup-and-saucer comedy, with the correlative development of farce—an apparent increase in quantity, a real improvement in quality—is one of the salient facts of the past four years. Another and no less significant fact is the unexampled vogue of modern and so-called realistic melodrama. The Princess's, the Adelphi, and Drury Lane have flourished and waxed fat on the productions of Messrs. Jones, Sims, Pettitt, Buchanan, and Harris—productions as to whose merit I shall have something to say when I come to speak of playwrights individually. Melodrama, too, has come in for a large slice in the partition of the domains of cup-and-saucer comedy, deceased. It has annexed the Haymarket and the Prince's, while the St. James's has been handed over to French emotional drama and the Court to farce. This prevalence of melodrama seems to me a much more important, if not more staggering, fact than the popularity of the farces before which Mr. Pollock's criticism reels. I own I do not quite know what to make of it. Is it to be

welcomed? Is it to be deplored? At first I strongly inclined to the former view. It seemed to me that modern melodrama, with all its conventional methods and pinchbeck accessories, drew its vitality from a certain amount of keen observation of real life. The writers were clearly inferior in point of mere stagecraft and inventive power to the older generation of melodramatists, French and English, the Dennery-Boucicault school as we may call it; but this inferiority seemed to be counterbalanced in some of them by a tendency to "go to nature," and, in certain characters and episodes at least, to paint from the life. I hoped that, as time went on, observation and sincerity would gradually gain the upper hand, while the pinchbeck and pasteboard framework would be held less and less essential. The course of events has somewhat shaken that hope, as I shall have to confess more at length in speaking of the later works of Mr. G. R. Sims. I cannot quite lose faith in the ultimate evolution of a form of drama which shall soberly and simply reproduce the everyday aspects of modern life, without having recourse to lost wills, and mysterious murders, and Enoch-Arden bigamies, and Tweedledum-Tweedledee twins; only I am not so confident

*To be welcomed  
or deplored?*

*Decline of  
opera-bouffe  
and burlesque*

as I once was that the germ of this form of art is to be found in modern melodrama.

A third feature of the past four years, by no means to be overlooked, is the decline of opera-bouffe and burlesque. The fact of this decline is patent, though just as I write there seems to be a slight recrudescence of burlesque at one or two playhouses. A few years ago we used never to be without two, three, or even more French operettas running simultaneously at as many theatres, while the "sacred lamp of burlesque" was assiduously tended at the Gaiety, and flared intermittently in several minor fanes. Now, to parody an often-quoted saying, opera-bouffe spells ruin and burlesque bankruptcy. The successful French operettas of the past three years could be counted on the fingers of one hand, and the "three-act burlesque dramas" of the Gaiety seemed flickering to the point of extinction when a little fresh oil was poured into the lamp at Christmas last. The talents of two genuine comedians, Messrs. Brough and Edouin, secured a success for "The Babes" at Toole's Theatre last year, but even these popular actors have recently suffered sad reverses at the Novelty. Some clever parodies of popular plays have had a certain vogue at Toole's, the Gaiety, and the

Strand, but these are a sign of vivid general interest in the serious productions of the day rather than any great love of burlesque for its own sake. No doubt there is still, and will always be while the present constitution of society maintains itself, a special public for mere "leg-pieces," but the general public seems, for the moment at any rate, to have turned its back upon the flesh-pots of Egypt.

Among the causes of this change two are — *its causes.*  
 obvious, the rest obscure. The supply of French opera-bouffe, both as regards quantity and quality, has notably declined, so that even if the demand had been as strong as ever, there would have been difficulty in meeting it; and, on the other hand, there has been a fall in the demand owing to powerful native competition in the shape of those most popular entertainments of the day, the Gilbert-Sullivan operettas. *d. home*  
 Here, at last, is matter for almost unmixed rejoicing. The victory of Gilbertian extravaganza over opera-bouffe as adapted for the London market, is the victory of literary and musical grace and humour over rampant vulgarity and meretricious jingle. These two causes, then, account in great measure for the decline of opera-bouffe; but the decline of bur-

*Savoy extravaganza.*



lesque is still unexplained. I am not optimist enough to attribute it altogether to an improvement in popular taste, but neither do I think it reasonable to deny that it is symptomatic of a certain reaction against mere music-hall imbecility. May it not be that the lower public, avid of mere laughter, has split into two sections, the one sinking to the music-halls for its recreation, the other rising to the theatres of farce? I think, at any rate, that those who deplore the efflorescence of three-act farces should remember that three-act burlesque dramas have fallen into the sere and yellow leaf, and that a good part of the public which flocks to the Globe was three or four years ago flocking to the Gaiety, where, I venture to maintain, their state was still less gracious.

*Farce v. "burlesque drama."*

*Recapitulation.*

These, then, as it seems to me, are the salient points in the history of the past four years: 1. The decline of cup - and - saucer comedy, with the correlative growth of farce. 2. The prosperity of modern melodrama. 3. The decadence of burlesque and operabouffe, balanced by the great popularity of Gilbert-Sullivan musical extravaganza. We shall find all these tendencies further illustrated in the ensuing rapid survey of the work of individual playwrights.



Glancing down the list of those whom, four years ago, I felt justified in describing as "Dramatists of To-day," I find that only one blank has been caused by death. Mr. H. J. Byron, an amiable man and a fertile and genial humourist, has left a larger gap in theatrical society than on the stage itself. His two posthumous plays, "Open House" 'at the Vaudeville, and "The Shuttlecock" at Toole's, showed him working his old vein of verbal quips and cranks, and showed, too, that the popularity of this style of comedy was practically exhausted. Mr. Byron's decline, indeed, was involved in that of the cup-and-saucer school to which he really belonged, dispensing, instead of the aromatic tea of Robertson, a homelier brew of mild and unstimulant cocoa.

*Individual  
playwrights:*

*The late Mr.  
Byron,*

Alphabetical priority places Mr. James Albery at the head of the list of living playwrights; and, so far as talent is concerned, there is little doubt that this might have been his place in the order of achievement. Might have been!—it is with heartfelt regret that I use this melancholy tense. Somehow or other Mr. Albery has dropped out of the race. Since 1882 we have only two Criterion adaptations, "Little Miss Muffet" and "Featherbrain," to place to his credit. Rumour assigns to him the function of

*Mr. Albery,*

revising and touching up many productions at that popular playhouse, but for my part I trust rumour is mistaken. It is sad enough to think of Mr. Albery as the ghost of himself, but sadder still to conceive him Mr. Wyndham's "ghost."

*Mr. Buchanan :*

So long as pluck and perseverance are held admirable qualities, Mr. Robert Buchanan's career as a playwright cannot fail to earn for him a certain amount of consideration. In the face of all manner of adverse circumstances he has conquered a footing on the boards. Chief among the adverse circumstances is an incurable crudity of stagecraft, or, in other words, a total want of dramatic tact. Some of his earlier works—such as "The Witchfinder," "A Madcap Prince," "Corinne," and "The Shadow of the Sword"—are unknown to me. The first of his plays which comes within my recollection is "The Nine-Days' Queen," a tragedy in blank verse on the subject of Lady Jane Grey, which would probably have been highly successful—last century. Since its production Mr. Buchanan has devoted himself mainly to melodrama, in which, I cannot help fancying, he has set himself to take a grim revenge on the public for their small appreciation of his poetical plays. Whatever the cause, it is certain that a cynical contempt for his

audiences seems to be the dominating force in *His cynicism*; his theatrical inspiration. Mr. Buchanan has a certain standing as a poet and critic. He is a man of much literary faculty and some judgment. It is inconceivable that he should be unaware of the crudity of his dramatic work. I am persuaded that he must deliberately write down to what he imagines to be the taste of his audiences. It is true that a good deal of his fiction is marked by the same coarse-grained, rough-hewn mannerism, but this may be due to a similar scorn for the capacity of a certain section of the reading public. His admiration for Mr. Charles Reade, too, has clearly had a baneful influence on Mr. Buchanan's literary and dramatic style. He has imitated all that is least admirable in Mr. Reade's work, and has reproduced his robustiousness without its vigour, his theatricality without its effectiveness. In some cases he has overestimated the degradation of public taste, and has written too low down to attract even the groundlings; but in one or two instances his cynicism seems to have justified itself.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mr. Buchanan disclaims responsibility for two anonymous plays which have been currently attributed to him—"The Exiles of Erin; or St. Abe and his Seven Wives" at the Olympic, and "Lottie" at the Novelty—the latter an amusing little piece.

*His plays.*

“Lady Clare,” at the Globe, was a fairly workmanlike adaptation of “Le Maître de Forges,” better than the French piece afterwards translated for the St. James’s, in so far that it did not presuppose a knowledge of the novel. There was a good deal of unnecessary vulgarity in the character-drawing, but on the whole it may perhaps be called the best thing Mr. Buchanan has done. “Storm-Beaten,” at the Adelphi, was a prodigious piece of paste-board-and-size melodrama, amusing in its blustering, bombastic, transpontinism. What chiefly impressed me in it was the audacity with which the curtain was brought down three successive times upon practically the same situation. What probably attracted the public was a grotesque scene at the North Pole or thereabouts, in which Mr. Charles Warner, Mr. Barnes, and an Aurora Borealis played some fantastic tricks before high heaven. “A Sailor and his Lass,” written in collaboration with Mr. Augustus Harris, may be shortly described as the worst of recent Drury Lane melodramas, and to have produced the worst of that sublime series is certainly a distinction. “Bachelors,” at the Haymarket, a comedy from the German, written in collaboration with Mr. Hermann Vezin, was antiquated in plot and dull in

dialogue, but otherwise inoffensive. Lastly, Mr. Buchanan, collaborating with Miss Harriet Jay, has treated us to a portentous melodrama at the Olympic, entitled "Alone in London." Though a little better than "A Sailor and his Lass," it was a mere patchwork of threadbare characters and worn-out sensations, a shambling and clumsy puppet-show. If it was really successful, Mr. Buchanan can certainly plead justification for holding in low esteem the intelligence of the British playgoer.

I have spoken my mind freely on what I conceive to be Mr. Buchanan's shortcomings, because I suspect him of the most unpardonable sin a craftsman can commit—that of not doing his best. Nature has denied him any great share of the dramatic faculty, but it is incredible that a man of his talent and culture should be unable to turn out better work than "Storm-Beaten," "A Sailor and his Lass," and "Alone in London." As it is, the graduates of the Grecian write every bit as well as Mr. Buchanan, and construct a vast deal better. When we see a man striving honestly to be an artist, he commands our respect, however unsuccessful his efforts; but when one who should be an artist deliberately elects to play the showman, we have no hesitation in saying with

*Artist or showman?*

perfect frankness that he is but a poor showman after all.

*Mr. Burnand.* Except as regards burlesque Mr. F. C. Burnand has almost retired from the active list of playwrights. His one serious production—was it a serious production?—of the past four years has “left but a name” in theatrical annals. It was called “Just in Time,” and was produced at the Avenue Theatre, Mr. John S. Clarke playing the hero. The title and the actor would lead one to suppose it a farce, but Mr. Burnand seems to have intended it for a melodrama. Its life was short, and it would be inhuman to vex its ghost by posthumous criticism. Of the Gaiety burlesques, too, produced during this period, silence is the best epitaph. On the other hand, it would be unjust not to record the merited success of three travesties produced at Toole’s Theatre—“Paw Claudian,” “Stage Dora,” and “The O’Dora.” These were good-humoured but trenchant satires upon plays which seemed written to tempt the parodist. The quaintness of Mr. Toole and Miss Marie Linden’s genius for mimicry rendered them irresistibly comic. The latest of the series, “Faust and Loose,” was unfortunately not so entertaining.

A happy knack in taking fortune at the flood

has brought Mr. J. Comyns Carr to the front as the adaptor of the popular novelettes of the late "Hugh Conway." He has shown some skill and judgment in cutting his coats according to the cloth. "Called Back," by far the better story of the two, was more difficult than its successor to fit to the stage, for the simple reason that the opening incident, in which lay its chief originality, had to be deprived of half its horror, whereas the strongest scene in "Dark Days," that of the trial, could be transferred to the boards almost unaltered, and (thanks to Mr. Pateman's admirable acting) produced a really thrilling effect. The two dramas, then (the former produced at the Prince's, the latter at the Haymarket), were of pretty equal merit, the greater neatness of "Dark Days" being counterbalanced by the extreme dulness of its opening acts. Neither was of the slightest importance to stage-history, for in neither was there any study of character, observation of life, or originality of method. They existed for the sake of one or two startling situations, and were therefore mere passing eddies in the current of dramatic development, as ephemeral as the booklets to which they owed their being. Mr. Carr is also the author of "A Fireside Hamlet," a one-act

*Mr. Carr and  
Mr. Fergus.*



*Messrs. Carton  
and Raleigh :  
" The Great  
Pink Pearl."*

trifle produced at the Prince's. It contained some excellent dialogue, but was weak in idea.

A very remarkable fantastic farce, "The Great Pink Pearl," secures for its authors, Messrs. Carton and Raleigh, a prominent place among present-day playwrights. Though it had a considerable run, I believe I am right in saying that it was not strikingly successful—a fact for which I am at a loss to account. It showed great ingenuity of construction, with a whimsical and original vein of humour. The dialogue occasionally descended to unworthy quibbles, but was, on the whole, admirably bright and ingenious. The construction was remarkable in one respect, as showing that the repetition of a situation, generally disastrous, may, if skilfully handled, produce an excellent comic effect. The arrest of the bailiff at the end of the first act was amusing enough; but when, towards the close of the second act, the audience began to foresee that the unhappy officer of the law was again to be caught in his own toils, and this time under doubly irritating circumstances, one of those irresistible thrills of amusement ran through the house, in which the art of the farce-constructor manifests itself most clearly. I cannot more strongly express the pleasure I received from "The Great Pink



Pearl" than by saying that it reminded me of an adventure from Mr. R. L. Stevenson's "New Arabian Nights," fitted for the stage, not without a touch of Mr. Stevenson's peculiar quality of humour. Its incomplete success may perhaps be attributable to the same cause which has rendered "The New Arabian Nights" less popular than much fiction of vastly inferior merit—to wit, the humorous treatment of matters which strike the British public as excessively serious. The average playgoer regards dynamite and diplomacy as things not to be trifled with, and the infusion of melodrama which, to some palates, gave the work its chief piquancy, may have contributed to make it caviare to the general.

It is said that a French encyclopædia, *Mr. Derrick.* published under clerical influence, gives the following concise account of the sage of Ferney: "Voltaire, *voir* Enfer." In the same way I may say of the author of "Confusion": "Derrick, *see* Censor." Two out of the three plays of Mr. Joseph Derrick are of importance only as illustrations of the futility of our irresponsible censorship, and will be duly dealt with in a subsequent essay; the third is of *Page 145.* no importance whatever. Mr. Derrick has a trick of the stage which enables him to

produce an occasional comic effect without the aid either of wit or of genuine humour. Its vulgarity apart, "Confusion" (at the Vaudeville) was not without a certain extravagant ingenuity, but "Twins" (at the Olympic) had not even this claim to attention. "Plebeians," a so-called comedy recently produced at the Vaudeville, was like a play of Mr. Byron's without its verbal wit.

*Mr. Gilbert :  
his operettas.*

The great and well-deserved success of his musical extravaganzas has had the effect of almost entirely diverting Mr. W. S. Gilbert's energies from the regular stage. It is pleasant to be able to say that not only the success, but the merit of these delightful pieces, has marvellously maintained itself. Taking "The Pirates" and "Patience" as Mr. Gilbert's high-water mark, one may, perhaps, admit a slight decline in "Iolanthe" and "Princess Ida," but it is difficult to give any valid reason for such a judgment, and, decline or no decline, they remain immeasurably superior to all competitors in the same field. In "The Mikado," again, Mr. Gilbert is certainly at his highest level. A more charming entertainment of its kind could with difficulty be conceived. Scenically and musically, it is as bright and graceful as a fairy-tale, and to accuse Mr. Gilbert of

repeating himself in the libretto is merely to say that he does not invent a fresh style of humour for every new opera. Mr. Gilbert's humour is neither of the richest nor of the rarest. Sometimes (but very seldom in these operas) it is unpleasant to the point of repulsiveness. Yet, with all its flaws and limitations, it is original, individual, and (unlike some sorts of so-called humour) genuinely amusing. Moreover, it finds expression in forms which bespeak the conscientious literary craftsman; and when all these merits are combined I think it would be ungrateful to complain of a little mannerism. Every humourist has his mannerism, Rabelais as well as Labiche, Swift as well as Gilbert.

The only non-musical piece produced by Mr. Gilbert during the past four years is "Comedy and Tragedy," a one-act trifle written for Miss Mary Anderson during her tenancy of the Lyceum. Founded on a prose sketch, also by Mr. Gilbert, it is simply a setting for a bravura passage designed to illustrate Miss Anderson's mimetic versatility. As such, it serves its purpose with no little ingenuity. Some of its defects are inseparable from the subject, but others are avoidable, and consequently irritating. Why, in the first place, does Mr. Gilbert change the Duc de Richelieu of his sketch into

*"Comedy and  
Tragedy."*



the much more definite historic figure of the Duc d'Orléans, Regent of France, thus trebling the unreality of the whole construction? Why does the best stage manager in England allow the said Regent to promenade at large about the room, so that he has but to take two bounds to be with his friends in the upper storey, and laugh at the pair who have so ingeniously trapped him? Surely the whole point of the situation is gone when D'Aulnay makes no attempt to block his passage to the stairs, by which it would be his first instinct to escape. Could not the business of the key be managed a little less clumsily? And, finally, is it not rather inhuman of the whole party to drop into an elegant tableau around the victorious D'Aulnay, utterly unmindful of the unfortunate Regent of France, who is "wounded to the death" in the back garden? Dr. Choquart seems, indeed, to be a bit of a Jacobin, or at least of a Girondin, born out of due time; but for the credit of his profession he could scarcely refrain from offering some assistance even to such a bloated Bourbon as the Regent, instead of calmly leaving him to welter at leisure in his blue blood. However artificial and unreal a play may be, it is always well to finish it off neatly, and leave neither gaps nor loose ends in the fabric.

Last of the cup-and-saucer school, Mr. G. *Mr. Godfrey.* W. Godfrey is also one of the best. His dialogue is admirable as regards both wit and taste, but his plays lack substance and stamina. He was for some time playwright-in-ordinary to the Court Theatre, last stronghold of cup-and-saucerism. Here he produced "The Parvenu," a pleasant little comedy; "The Millionaire," founded on Mr. Edmund Yates's novel, "Kissing the Rod"; and "The Opal Ring," an adaptation from Feuillet's "Péril en la Demeure." In "The Millionaire" the character of Mr. Guyon was really memorable. His answer to his daughter's remonstrance on his extravagance has always struck me as a fine touch of humour. "If I paid my debts," he says, with an air of the utmost conviction, "I should be living beyond my income, and that I will never consent to do!" At the Court, too, Mr. Godfrey's witty duologue, "My Milliner's Bill," has been received with great and deserved applause, partly due, no doubt, to the admirable playing of Mr. Arthur Cecil and Mrs. John Wood. Mr. Godfrey, I fancy, is one of those writers who would find great profit in the assistance of a judicious collaborator.

One vaudeville adapted from the French, *Mr. Grundy*, two original comic operas, one drama, and three

*Operettas.**"Rachel."*

comedies—that is the tale of Mr. Sydney Grundy's work<sup>1</sup> during the period under review. I have named the items in the inverse order of their importance. The vaudeville, "La Cosaque," at the Royalty, may be dismissed with a mere mention. Of the two operettas, one, "The Vicar of Bray," at the Globe, was fairly successful; the other, "Pocahontas," was a failure at the Empire. Both librettos were written with a neatness worthy of Mr. Gilbert, and both contained many ingenious and amusing ideas. "Pocahontas" was ruined by the total inability of the leading actress to put any spirit or humour into her part, the Indian princess appearing in all the blonde exuberance of the pure-bred Teuton, and indicating her savage nature only by an extreme scantiness of drapery. The real misfortune of both productions, however, lay in the music of Mr. Edward Solomon, a composer whose technical merits are, I believe, considerable, but who possesses in a very minor degree the gift of insinuating and haunting melody, essential in comic opera. "Rachel," the one drama on Mr. Grundy's list, was written for Miss Geneviève

<sup>1</sup> "A Novel Reader," privately performed at the Globe, is mentioned in a subsequent essay on "The Censorship of the Stage," p. 138.

Ward, and produced by her at the Olympic. Its prologue was a masterpiece of exposition, rapid, crisp, amusing, and interesting. In the three acts which followed there were several strong situations and much admirable dialogue, but Mr. Grundy had suffered his admiration for modern French workmanship to tempt him into over-ingenuity. The interweaving of motives was in reality logical enough, but to keep the strands clear required a greater mental exertion than could reasonably be demanded of an average audience. Consequently some of the best situations missed their full effect. One in particular, in which a handkerchief accidentally stained with red-ink was used to make it appear that a murder had been committed, was felt to overpass the bounds of legitimate adroitness and to partake of the nature of legerdemain. It was Sardou caricatured. "The Queen's Favourite," also produced by Miss Ward at the Olympic, was a very skilful adaptation of Scribe's "Verre d'Eau." The dialogue was entirely original, and extremely polished and witty. There was little attempt at historic truth of characterization or accuracy of diction—history and Scribe are incompatibles—but as a piece of purely intellectual comedy the play was very remarkable.

*"The Queen's  
Favourite."*



*"The Glass of Fashion."*

Mr. Grundy's two original comedies claim more careful notice, not only on account of their originality, but of their merit. Mr. G. R. Sims had, I believe, some hand in the composition of "*The Glass of Fashion*," produced at the Globe, but as he withdrew his name from the playbills we may consider it as mainly Mr. Grundy's work. It was certainly the best social comedy, properly so called, of the period under review. It dealt forcibly and incisively with two of the minor abuses of modern society—the craving for publicity and the passion for play. The motives were welded together with much skill, every character was a study, and every speech went home. The end of the third act, the capital situation of the piece, was again a trifle over-ingenious. The effect was strong, but by dint of sheer cleverness of elaboration it became unconvincing. It was an intrusion of artificial drama of intrigue, after the Scribe-Sardou recipe, into what ought to have been, and was in other respects, a realistic comedy of manners. In the last act, too, a serious error was committed. After leading up to what would have been a natural and charming solution of the nodus, to wit, Mrs. Trevanion's frank confession to her husband of her errors and frivolities, the authors



seem abruptly to have changed their minds and preferred a painful, theatrical, and impossible cutting of the knot by means of an outburst of spiteful rage on the part of Borowski—an outburst which, in real life, Colonel Trevanion would promptly have checked by kicking the adventurer out of his house. This is a grave and very regrettable flaw, marring the logic of the action and detracting from our sympathy with the leading characters; otherwise the play is an admirable specimen of satiric comedy, bright, vigorous, trenchant, and relevant at every point to the social life of the day.

“The Silver Shield,” though produced after “The Glass of Fashion,” is, I believe, in reality an earlier work. It is a play of masterly dialogue but of mediocre plot. Mr. Grundy took a leaf from Molière’s book, and in his last scene (one of those pieces of daring ingenuity of which he has the secret) passed his own “Critique on ‘The Silver Shield,’” pleading guilty to a lack of novelty in some of the combinations. Criticism, however, does not end here. That some of his expedients happen to be old is a matter of small moment; the trouble is that when they were new they were worth but little. There is scarcely a situ-

*“The Silver Shield.”*

ation in the piece which is not foreseen, and the tableaux which close the first and second acts are its weakest instead of its strongest points.

The first act contains two situations—Tom Potter's recognition of the wife he supposed dead, and the announcement to Sir Humphrey Chetwynd of his son's marriage. The former is handled in a surprisingly juvenile fashion. "How well do I remember my last glimpse of her! It was such another sunny day as this. I saw her, as it might be, framed in yonder doorway," &c. Who does not know this time-honoured cue for a theatrical resurrection? Mr. Grundy might easily have invented a trick worth two of this. The concluding situation is not, I think, precisely the one of many possible situations which should have been chosen. It does not suggest the interest of the succeeding acts, or rather it suggests a wrong interest. Sir Humphrey's quarrel with his son, which is the matter emphasized, is of no importance whatever, whereas Lucy's jealousy of Alma Blake, on which the rest of the play turns, is in no way foreshadowed. Mr. Dodson Dick's comic interruption is a Pinero-ism, which seems to have strayed by mistake into the work of a writer so orthodox in his methods as Mr.

Grundy. As to the means by which, in the second act, the misunderstanding between Ned and Lucy is brought about, Mr. Dodson Dick's criticism of them in the final scene is very just. The passage in which Alma Blake soliloquizes over Lucy's cast-off wedding-ring does not come within his ken, or he would doubtless describe it as "secondhand Sardou." Almost every play of the vivacious Victorien has a similar scene of ratiocination (as it might be called), but even the scent of Zicka's gloves is a more conceivable clue than the warmth of a wedding-ring which has lain for a quarter of an hour or so on the floor. In his anxiety to extract great effects from little causes, Mr. Grundy goes too far. The ring is made to radiate altogether too much heat and light. Here fault-finding ends. Lucy's going on the stage is a rather conventional proceeding, and one does not quite understand why, if she wishes to remain concealed from her husband, she accepts an engagement with Dodson Dick; but such admirable scenes of comedy are built upon this foundation that one cannot look too closely into its solidity. Alma Blake's "tantrums" are studied from the life with equal humour and good-humour; and Dodson Dick, though not without an allowable touch

*Secondhand  
Sardou.*

of caricature, is a brilliantly amusing study of the cheesemonger-manager of the old school. The closing scene, which forms at once an apologetic epilogue and an integral part of the play, is really a masterpiece, and whatever the defects of the comedy as a whole, they are small in proportion to its merits. The character-types are keenly observed; the dialogue glitters with that best quality of dramatic wit which springs from the friction of character with character. From first to last "there is no offence in't"; and though the clergyman and his wife are distinctly caricatures, puerility and buffoonery are totally absent. In short, it is a sterling English comedy, not all gold, but none of it mere pinchbeck.

*A creed out-  
worn.*

Mr. Grundy's chief fault as a constructor is that he is too clever. Three out of the four plays here dealt with contain scenes in which he has attempted to out-Sardou Sardou, in no case with complete success. If he will accept my advice, he will study and take to heart the theatrical criticisms of M. Zola, not because they contain the whole truth, but because they present forcibly that side of the truth which is not to be found in his favourite gospel according to Scribe. He has been "suckled in a

creed outworn," and it is time that he should recognize its obsolescence.

The irony of the alphabet brings together on my list two playwrights who may be most conveniently dealt with in company with their collaborators. To put it briefly: "Harris, Mr. Augustus, *see* Buchanan and Pettitt; Herman, Mr. Henry, *see* Jones and Wills." Whatever his powers as a dramatist, Mr. Harris is *Mr. Harris.* certainly an admirable stage-manager. The new school of Drury Lane sensation drama owes at least half its success to his skill and energy as a "drill-sergeant," to use a phrase of Macklin's which comes in very aptly in this context. Mr. Herman has given us only one *Mr. Herman.* work of his own unaided manufacture, "The Fay o' Fire," an operetta produced at the Opera Comique. It was a curiously amateurish piece of work, and terribly tedious withal.

"Young Mrs. Winthrop," produced at the *Mr. B. Howard.* Court, is the only play which Mr. Bronson Howard has added to his cis-Atlantic record *"Young Mrs. Winthrop."* since 1882. It was, I understand, Bowdlerized, or rather cup-and-saucerized, to suit what the author or the management conceived to be English taste. I think this reconstruction was a mistake; nay, I am sure it was, if we owed to it the vapid, tasteless, and absurd concluding

scene, in which a husband and wife, seriously bent on separation, are induced by the ill-timed jocosities of their family lawyer to kiss again with tears. This passage, however, was almost the only serious fault in an admirable play, simple in method, thoughtful in tone, natural yet witty and nervous in dialogue. To say that the theme is not new is no criticism. It is merely a slightly disguised statement of the fact that the world is not new, and that Mr. Bronson Howard is not the first playwright who has made studies in civilized society. Not to go further back, Sardou has shown us in "La Famille Benoîton" a husband estranged from his wife in the absorbing struggle for wealth, and has even used the illness of their child as a means of heightening the situation. Further, the immediate fulcrum of the action—a wife suspecting her husband's faith, when he has in reality been making sacrifices to save her own brother from disgrace—has been used by T. W. Robertson in "Ours," and no doubt appears in many other novels and plays. But what of that? A dramatic motive is not like a block of marble, from which can be carved one statue and no more. Life is plastic. The same mass of raw material may be moulded in fifty different forms, some to honour and

*No monopoly  
in dramatic  
motives.*

some to dishonour. M. Victorien Sardou and Mr. Bronson Howard both observe a certain common social phenomenon of our commercial age. Each develops from it a series of situations, Mr. Howard's quite different from M. Sardou's; and, in their way, every bit as good. The American is not to be frightened off the ground because the Frenchman happens to have been there before him. In the domain of the drama there is no such thing as private property in the actual soil; all that the playwright can demand is security for his improvements. Were tenure in fee-simple permissible, the whole cultivatable area would long ago have been occupied by a syndicate of pestilent land-grabbers named Menander, Calderon, Shakespeare & Co., and the dramatist of to-day would have had no resource save emigration to some other planet. Fortunately, though the field of human nature is limited, each generation, nay, each individual, has an indefeasible right to reap a harvest from the soil. This right Mr. Bronson Howard has exercised in "Young Mrs. Winthrop" without the slightest infringement on any just claim which can be advanced by any one else.

When I published, in 1882, the above-mentioned volume of essays, several critics

*Mr. Jones.*



professed themselves greatly amazed to find the name of Mr. Henry A. Jones on the list of dramatists of the day. "Who is Mr. Jones?" they asked; a question which Mr. Jones himself promptly answered by producing "*The Silver King*." Yet the question was not to be wondered at, for whatever may have been his promise, Mr. Jones's performance, up to that turning-point in his career, had been somewhat scant. He is the only playwright now in the front rank whose noteworthy work falls entirely within the period at present under notice. It was his evident earnestness of purpose rather than his actual achievement which induced me to include him in my list of four years ago; and this earnestness of purpose is still his best quality. He takes himself and his calling seriously—an excellent trait, whatever the scoffers may say. It is his desire, according to his lights, to produce good work; and he strives after other lights than the footlights. If much of his work is of the stage, stagey, in all of it there are occasional touches of sympathetic observation, with here and there an effort after imaginative vitality. The effort may sometimes be too apparent, but over-tension is better than apathy.

"*The Silver King*."

"*The Silver King*," written in collaboration



with Mr. Herman, is quite the best of modern English melodramas. The initial idea, excellent in itself, is effectively carried out, the scene of the murder at the end of the first act being one of the strongest stage effects in recent drama. The second act is very interesting, and the homely pathos of the third act, though cheap enough, is honest, and deserves its popularity. The conclusion is somewhat lamely worked out, especially as regards the steps by which Wilfred Denver arrives at the knowledge of his innocence; but in these days we cannot afford to quarrel with a play because it is unequal. The real strength of "The Silver King," however, the quality which attracts one to it a second and even a third time, when its mere interest of plot has evaporated, is the care with which the whole canvas, so to speak, is worked over by the artist. No corner is without some little touch of character, some amusing or sympathetic detail. The three scoundrels of the play, "the Spider," "Father Christmas," and "the Duke of New York," are novel and admirable stage-figures. Jakes, the old servant, is a pleasant variation of the Caleb Balderstone type, and several minor parts are neatly touched in. I shall have something to

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say later on as to the theology of the play, and of melodrama generally; but none of its defects, whether of construction or of moral, is so great as to deprive it of its claim to consideration as an altogether healthy and creditable popular play.

"*Breaking a Butterfly.*"

In two other plays Mr. Jones has collaborated with Mr. Herman. "*Breaking a Butterfly*," produced at the Prince's, was an adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's "*Et Dukkehjem*" (*A Doll's House*). It falsified, or rather ignored, the whole ethical import of Ibsen's play, distorted the motive by making the husband a would-be ideal character, and converted the tragedy into a commonplace comedy-drama. All this manipulation—I had almost said stultification—was necessary to make Ibsen tolerable to the English theatre-goer, and even then the piece proved unattractive. Its principal merit was its easy and unpretentious yet pointed

"*Chatterton.*"

The dialogue of "*Chatterton*," a one-act tragedy by the same authors, played at the Princess's, was not precisely unpretentious, but it was nervous and interesting. I am not sure that the impassioned defence of poesy, placed in the mouth of the "*marvellous boy*," would read as well as it declaimed, but on the stage it was certainly effective. No attempt

was made to reproduce or analyze the strange idiosyncrasies of the historical Chatterton. He was simply taken as an accepted type of genius at war with poverty. A "female interest" was of course dragged in, not too adroitly, and tragic irony was obtained by representing the poet as succumbing to despair on the very threshold of fame and fortune. All such theatrical machinery is ludicrous enough when we analyze it in cold blood, but in its own place—to wit, in the theatre—it serves its purpose of providing an action in which character can display itself. Taken as a whole, "Chatterton" may be called a thoughtful and original little play.

In "Saints and Sinners," at the Vaudeville, Mr. Jones had no collaborator, and proved himself thoroughly competent to stand alone. There was no novelty in the theme he chose. We have all seen over and over again the wayward girl placed between homely affection and seductive fascination, conquered, almost against her will, by evil, and brought back by love and forgiveness to her better self. The story is as old as human nature, or at least as the social forms in which it has for centuries clothed itself. Except in one instance, the powerful and admirable scene in the vestry of Little

*"Saints and Sinners."*



Bethel, Mr. Jones did not even invent any very novel situations through which to develop his plot. The attraction of the play consisted in its genuine and, so to speak, first-hand observation of character, and the skill with which the story was given a local habitation in a secluded corner of modern English life. Even the characters were in a sense familiar, but that was merely because they were types, not eccentricities. The devoted pastor, whose wide heart makes us forget his narrow mind, is a familiar personage in fiction, and, we may hope, in fact. As for the Pharisee, it is eighteen centuries and more since the name became a by-word, and the thing no doubt existed as many centuries before that again. Mr. Jones dealt in well-known figures of the human comedy; sometimes, as in the case of the rival lovers, good and evil, they were little more than lay figures; but even into these he managed to infuse some semblance of life. The chief positive fault in the characterization was a lack of subtlety in the portraiture of the hypocrite, Hoggard. His wiles were too obvious and unskilful, and, as in the case of Sir Geoffrey Heriot in Mr. Grundy's "Mammon," it was not sufficiently clear how far he himself was the dupe of his hypocrisy.

In his two plays produced since "Saints and Sinners," Mr. Jones has had Mr. Wilson Barrett for a collaborator, and the marked inferiority of these works suggests some reflections as to the principle of actor-manager collaboration.

I say the principle, not the practice, for Mr. Barrett has elevated his practice into a principle. "I take leave to think," he said, in a recent interview (*Daily News*, February 16, 1885), "that dramatic authors are mistaken in finishing off a play and expecting to direct its entire production themselves, without reference to scenic effect and many other things which go to make the success of a stage-play, together with a good plot, striking situations, and telling dialogue. I wish to urge this with all modesty, but I think that the people who do the work of production can often help the author very much after he has invented his motive or mainspring. It is quite opposed to the method I have found most successful to accept a play absolutely as it is written and subject only to the author's emendations." Have we been wrong, then, in conceiving a serious dramatic work as an organic art-product, the necessary expression of a creative individuality? Entirely mistaken, is the answer; you may have "a good plot, striking

*Actor-manager  
collaboration.*

situations, and telling dialogue," but "scenic effect" is a matter beyond the ken of the mere author. If he thinks he can write a play fit to be acted, he is reckoning without his stage-carpenter and his actor-manager.

*The actor-autocrat in England;*

Mr. Barrett's point of view, the actor's point of view, must be admitted to be, for the moment, the only practical one, so far, at least, as melodrama is concerned. How many of our English authors possess enough force of character and mastery of the stage to impose their conceptions upon an autocratic actor-manager? One, perhaps—Mr. W. S. Gilbert. Mr. Barrett regrets that Mr. Gilbert does not do more serious work; were he to write a poetic melodrama and take it to the Princess's, Greek would meet Greek, and there would come a tug of war in Oxford Street. Other authors put themselves in the hands of their actor-managers, by reason of their lack of what may be called authoritative dramatic instinct, and of the organizing genius required for good stage-management. In France it is otherwise. What would Victorien Sardou say to Mr. Barrett's claim to collaborate with him?—for nothing less than collaboration is implied in this refusal "to accept a play absolutely as it is written, and subject only to the author's emendations."

*The author-autocrat in France.*

When Sardou writes a play, he sees every scene, every grouping, every gesture in his mind's eye; and he comes down to the theatre with the will, and the power, to have his conceptions carried out to the letter. His actors pay him willing obedience, for they recognize in him their master, and it is in human nature to accept the dictates of consummate knowledge and faculty. Sardou, as we all know, is not above cutting a part to the measure of an actor or actress; on the contrary, in writing an important part he has always in his mind's eye the idea of the artist to whom he means to confide it. Nor, as we are given to understand, does he refuse to accept suggestions at rehearsal, and still less to modify or excise what his own judgment tells him to be ineffective or superfluous. But he has an absolute veto upon any change; every emendation must receive his sanction, and is strictly "the author's emendation." All French authors have, theoretically, this power; in proportion to their skill and experience in stagecraft, they all claim and exercise it, several of them with an ability almost as consummate as Sardou's. But let the average English author (even with Mr. Barrett's consent) go to the Princess's and attempt to play the Sardou! Before half a scene was rehearsed he would be the laughing-



stock of every one, from the leading-lady to the call-boy. In some cases, no doubt, from lack of faculty, in all from lack of experience, the English author is forced to content himself with being the obedient humble servant of his stage-manager, who is often his manager and his leading actor as well. He is not accustomed to conceive accurately and vividly what he wants done, and even where he has any clear conception he does not know how to explain and enforce it. Mr. Wills or Mr. Sims could more easily write another "Théodora" than put it on the stage when written; and an author of vague conceptions, with an imperfect command of the technique of the stage, necessarily tends to degenerate into a mere text-writer to a set of scenes and situations concocted on the joint-stock principle in which Mr. Wilson Barrett believes.

*"Hoodman  
Blind" and  
"The Lord  
Harry."*

In "Hoodman Blind" and "The Lord Harry," then, Mr. Jones is to be taken as playing the text-writer to the constructions, or at any rate the conceptions, of Mr. Wilson Barrett; and here we have an illustration of the destructive fallacy of the actor's point of view, which is, ultimately, that of personal display. The actor conceives certain situations in which he thinks he would shine,



certain tirades which it would please him to deliver. By hook or by crook a framework of plot has to be pieced together, so as to bring in these situations and tirades, and the result is that in nine cases out of ten unity of idea, probability of plot, neatness and balance of structure, are sacrificed to what the actor, whom his personal bias often makes the worst possible judge, chooses to consider "scenic effect." In "Hoodman Blind" the plot started from a romantic improbability, and developed through a series of inconceivable coincidences, until a crowning coincidence brought about a commonplace and ineffective sensation scene. In "The Lord Harry" there was no plot at all, but a mere series of adventures, which towards the end became grotesquely and childishly incredible. "Hoodman Blind" was in a measure redeemed by the writing of certain passages, the humour of one or two episodes, and especially by the wonderfully truthful acting of Miss Eastlake in the part of the waif, Jess London, which made the scene in "Twite's Cosy" really memorable. The merits of one or two scenes in the earlier part of "The Lord Harry" were insufficient to save it, as a whole, from the reproach of sheer emptiness and tediousness. Even in this play, however, Mr.

Jones's dialogue was written with commendable care, the chief fault being a tendency to turgid over-emphasis in passages of denunciation, which defaced one or two scenes in "Hoodman Blind" as well.

*Mr. Meritt.*

Once foremost among the East End invaders who, a few years ago, made a raid upon the melodramatic theatres of the West, Mr. Paul Meritt has latterly dropped into the rear. It may be that the cares of transpontine management have absorbed his energies; it may be that he is merely gathering himself up for a spring. For the present, in any case, he seems to have left the harvest both of glory and gain to his quondam collaborator, Mr. Pettitt, who, as we shall see, has remained an active worker in the field.

*Mr. Merivale.*

A more serious defection from the active list of playwrights is that of Mr. Herman Merivale. During the last four years—in fact, since the ill-fated "Cynic"—he has produced nothing in London, except a translation of Sardou's "Fédora," and only one or two pieces of slight importance in the provinces and America. That the author, or at least the part-author, of "All for Her" and "Forget-me-not" should be so long silent is greatly to be regretted, and the reason is hard to conjecture. There cannot,

surely, be a failure of demand for such admirable work as some of Mr. Merivale's.

Mr. Henry Pettitt is one of the most popular *Mr. Pettitt.* and prosperous playwrights of the day. He has had a hand in almost all the recent melodramatic successes at Drury Lane and the Adelphi. He has collaborated with Mr. Charles Reade in "Love and Money," with Mr. Augustus Harris in "Pluck" and "Human Nature," with Mr. G. R. Sims in "In the Ranks" and "The Harbour Lights." He is the best and most workmanlike of stage-carpenters, and good stage-carpentry, if not a fine art, is at least a useful and reputable handicraft. Mr. Pettitt graduated from that great school of sensation drama, the late lamented Grecian Theatre. His methods are still those which made his popularity in the City Road, but where the East End managers for whom he wrote spent a hundred pounds in scenery and sensations, Mr. Harris and the brothers Gatti spend a thousand. I cannot help professing a certain esteem for Mr. Pettitt, with his railway accidents and his conflagrations, his barracks and troop-ships and zerebas, his precipices and his life-boats, his wicked baronets, his persecuted heroines, his gallant Tommy-Atkinses, and his jovial jack-tars.

There is not much high art in all this, but neither is there any pretence at it. Mr. Pettitt produces good, honest melodrama, its ideals conventional, its methods crude, its characters hackneyed, its incidents incredible; but there is nothing particularly deleterious about his work, which is simply what it professes to be—good, honest melodrama. When men like Mr. Sims and Mr. Buchanan turn out such work, we feel that they might have done better, and we contrast the artist who might have been with the artisan who is. Mr. Pettitt, on the other hand, cannot be accused of selling his birthright for a mess of pottage, for the sufficient reason that he does not seem to have had a birthright to sell. He supplies a low, but not a degraded, demand, and supplies it in a skilful, workmanlike fashion. The honest labourer who does the best he can is worthy not only of his hire, but of his meed of praise.

*Mr. Pinero :*

Am I guilty of an odious comparison when I say that in my opinion Mr. A. W. Pinero is the most original and remarkable of living English playwrights, with a possible exception in favour of Mr. Gilbert? Other writers have done admirable things which Mr. Pinero has not attempted, and very likely could not do; but neither Mr. Grundy, Mr. Jones, Mr. Sims, nor

Mr. Merivale has the peculiar gift of inventive humour and turn for elaborate (if not always successful) characterization which have led to Mr. Pinero's successes—and his failures. For *his failures* : even his failures, which have been neither few nor far between, are to be attributed in great measure to a strong originality getting the bit between its teeth and galloping off into perversity. Of "Girls and Boys" (at Toole's), "The Rector" (at the Court) and "Low Water" (at the Globe), I shall say little. "The Rector" was a melancholy, "Low Water" an unspeakably comic, fiasco ; yet both were better worth seeing than half the successes of the day. The precise causes of their failure I cannot pretend to determine, after merely seeing them once on the stage. They are plays which the student would like to read and analyze in order to learn why such remarkable pieces of work proved so utterly impracticable in the theatre. Speaking from memory, I am inclined to attribute the failure of "The Rector" mainly to a curious obliquity of moral judgment, which deprived the hero of all sympathy precisely in the crucial scenes of the play. In "Low Water" the faults were chiefly technical—a jumbling of farce and drama not only in the same play, but absolutely in the same scenes.

The British public cannot stand the interruption of a scene of vital moment by the entrance of a coal-heaver to shoot a sack of coals into an ottoman; and in this the British public is quite right. It is all very well to show the sordidly comic side of genteel poverty, but these illustrative touches should be kept in their right place. You may as easily wing an arrow from a snapped bow-string as move an audience by a scene of serious interest after breaking the tension with an irrelevant grotesquery.

*his farces :*

"The Rocket," written for Mr. Edward Terry, was a clever but trivial piece of Thackerayan comedy. A much more remarkable work was "In Chancery," a farce which ranks with Mr. Gilbert's "Tom Cobb," among the neatest and finest pieces of humorous workmanship on the modern stage. "The Magistrate," again, was a product of inventive humour on a heroic scale, an extremely amusing and, despite some sins of over-elaboration, a quite masterly piece of fantasy. The subject was a very delicate one to handle, and Mr. Pinero deserves all credit for his treatment of it. He passed over the thin ice with perfect lightness and ease, and was as careful to exclude offence as some writers to drag it in.

A translation and an adaptation from the French at the St. James's need not detain us. The sins of "The Ironmaster" are on M. Ohnet's head, and those of "Mayfair" are at least shared by M. Sardou. Let us pass on to a play for which Mr. Pinero is solely responsible, and on which I propose to dwell at some length, both because I think it the strongest of the author's works, and because that opinion was by no means generally shared at the time of its production. I refer to "Lords and Commons," produced at the Haymarket.

*his adaptations.*

Mr. Pinero is responsible for the plot of this play, not in the sense of having invented it, but merely of having selected it of his own free will. It is founded on "Mannen af Börd och Qvinnan af Folket," a long and intensely moral Swedish romance, by Marie Sophie Schwartz, conceived somewhat in Spielhagen's earlier manner. The play, like the novel, rests on two highly improbable assumptions. The first, and to my mind the more improbable of the two, is that a young nobleman in the nineteenth century should repudiate an innocent girl whom he has married in the belief that she is his equal in rank, when he learns (on the marriage-day) that her birth is illegitimate. In Sweden it may be possible.

*"Lords and Commons."*



*Improbability*  
*No. I.*

There a stronger feeling of caste attaches to nobility. Our nobles think of themselves, not as a caste, but as a class; their rank is to them a privilege and not a religion. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, we may presume that the Earl of Caryl had been to Eton and Cambridge. If so, he must have had a bad time of it, and it says more for his doggedness of character than for his common sense that he did not get "a good deal of the nonsense knocked out of him." He had no personal objection to the girl he had married; she was innocent of the deception practised upon him; nothing is said of any violent counter-attachment which might have explained his action; to repudiate her was to inflict a gross cruelty upon her and to lame his own life; yet rather than cloud the azure of the Caryl blood, he chose to let that priceless fluid altogether evaporate. Truly a strained assumption on which to found a drama of modern life. Mr. Pinero tries to lessen the strain by marking, as much as possible, his mother's influence over the young peer. This goes, indeed, some way towards explaining the difficulty. If such bigotry of caste exists anywhere, it is certainly among the female half of the upper ten thousand, and a domineering woman may



exercise an enormous influence over a weak-minded man. But after all allowance has been made, the major premiss of the play remains a stumbling-block.

Mr. Pinero has, if anything, lessened the second improbability—that of the husband failing to recognize his wife. According to him they had never met since their childhood, except on the single occasion of their marriage. Years, illness, and suffering have altered features of which the Earl could, at best, have but a faint recollection. If we can suppose it possible that Bassanio, in the trial-scene, should not recognize Portia, surely we may allow Mr. Pinero an infinitely less startling improbability. A recent dramatic sketch by Ouida turns on a similar assumption, as does her novel of “Held in Bondage;” but that is indeed no argument for its probability. A better precedent is furnished by Freytag’s powerful drama, “Graf Waldemar.” Playwrights, we must remember, have, from time immemorial, taxed our credulity in their premises, and justified themselves by the strength of their conclusion. Mr. Pinero does not ask us to believe an impossibility, but merely to accept an improbability, and here he is certainly within his rights.

*Improbability*  
*No. 2.*

*An error of  
detail.*

The premises once accepted, the faults of the play seem to me mere faults of detail, by no means to be weighed against its merits. The gravest error is that into which Mr. Pinero has been betrayed in the last scene of the drama, partly by a too great respect for his original, partly by the aforesaid strange infirmity of moral judgment which has characterized almost all his plays. Lord Caryl has confessed his cruel folly in abandoning his wife, and declares that he would gladly make reparation to her, were it not that his heart is absorbed in a passion for the irresistible advocate who has pleaded her cause. This is at once the logical and the dramatically effective end of the play. The only rational and possible thing for the conquering heroine to do is to declare her identity and throw herself into his arms. Instead of this she carries the masquerade a step further, from the sublime to the ridiculous. She first confesses her love for him, and then makes him vow never to see her again, but to devote his life to making amends to the woman he has injured. After a struggle the Earl consents, and actually goes to meet his wife and begin his life of hypocrisy with her. Only when she does not appear where he had been told to expect her,

does it dawn upon him that he has been trifled with. The scene is a piece of the false idealism common in feminine fiction, and all the more out of place in the work of a notorious cynic like Mr. Pinero. That Mrs. Devenish should have thought of exacting this effort of so-called heroism is highly improbable, and the question whether the Earl should or should not have consented is a problem of difficult and purposeless casuistry with which the author has positively no right to trouble us. The play is over; its problem is solved; our interest is at an end. Why tag on the statement of another scarcely soluble enigma, whose solution we have not the smallest desire even to attempt?

“Lords and Commons” has, unquestionably, *The first night.* faults enough and to spare; yet I confess that I left the theatre on the first night with a feeling of pleasant exhilaration. The play seemed to me healthy and earnest in tone, entertaining in detail. The dialogue I thought admirable, the character sketches original, while it only needed a little closer playing to correct the dragging of one or two minor scenes. The audience, too, seemed to have shared my feeling, so far, at least, as the cheaper parts of the house were concerned.



*and the criticisms.*

My surprise was great, then, on reading the next week's papers, to find it treated on all hands with ridicule, contempt, or indignation. The plot was condemned as impossible, the characters were declared to be pasteboard puppets, either unreal or too realistic, and above all repulsive, while the tone of the play was denounced as cynical and even inhuman. The improbability of the plot I have admitted—let us now inquire a little into the other accusations.

*The motive of the play:*

A woman of fine character, but of low birth, is married to an arrogant and headstrong boy, who refuses to acknowledge the tie between them. She determines to teach him, in spite of himself, her worth and his own folly, and to prevent the shipwreck of two lives. It is, fortunately, no ordinary task, and she uses no ordinary means. In the end she succeeds, and pride of birth gives place to love of worth. Is this idea cynical? Then Shakespeare was a cynic of the deepest dye; for in these words I have stated the motive, not of "Lords and Commons" only, but of "All's Well that Ends Well." The means by which Helena conquers Bertram, as even Professor Dowden admits, "seem hardly to possess any moral force, any validity for the heart or the conscience;"

compared with them the proceedings of Mrs. Devenish are rational, modest, womanly. Yet Coleridge calls Helena "the loveliest of Shakespeare's characters," while Mrs. Devenish, we are told, is at once impossible and repulsive. It seems to be assumed that she came to Caryl Court with the intention of taking revenge by insulting and humiliating its owners, and that the reconciliation with Lord Caryl was an afterthought. Had this been her purpose, why should she so anxiously have maintained her incognito? If vulgar revenge was her motive, she should have blazoned abroad her identity, and thus given to the humiliation of the Caryls a treble sting. Unless I have greatly mistaken Mr. Pinero's intention, she, like Helena, has from the first a definite intention of reclaiming her husband. The vengeance she intends is of the coals-of-fire description. In the Earl's pecuniary embarrassments she has seen her opportunity. Only by humiliation can such obstinate pride be cured. She finds the Caryl family, like an oak overgrown with ivy, sickening under the burden of feudal prejudice. She lays the axe to the root of this poisonous overgrowth, but it can scarcely be said that she uses undue or unfeeling violence in tearing it away. To the

— *feudal  
prejudice.*

*"Unpleasant"  
characters.*

Caryls, as human beings, she is gentle and considerate; and if she hurts their aristocratic feelings in proving to them that, believing themselves superhuman, they have merely succeeded in becoming inhuman, why, the fault is in the feelings and not in her. She respects their prejudices far more than they respect her claim to ordinary courtesy. And here again the accusation of cynicism comes in. We are told that the Caryl family are "unpleasant." So they are. If they were not the play would not exist. Its theme is the shattering of their self-worship, and self-worship can never be a pleasant spectacle. They are regulating their life by a false ideal, and Mr. Pinero's cynicism merely lies in the touches by which he illustrates its falsity. Wrapped up in the privileges of their station, they have neglected its duties. The divinity which hedges them has shut them off from all human relations with their surroundings. Therefore the deputation from which the old countess expects a burst of "loyalty," shows no feeling but one of vulgar curiosity. Therefore the old steward, who has revelled in the privileges of feudal service, shows no conception of its duties — namely, gratitude and faithfulness. The author has, I admit,

over-accentuated the insolence of his trio of aristocrats in the first act. They are, if not impossibly, at least unnecessarily, inhuman. But the deletion of a very few speeches would correct this fault, while it would make their subsequent conversion more of a development and less of a revolution. For the rest, the Countess of Caryl seems to me a finely drawn character, standing to the Marchioness in "Caste" in the relation of a portrait to a caricature. She strikes me as at once less conventional and less offensive. On questions of personal impression, however, it is useless to argue. Her brother, again, Lord Percy Lewiscourt, is a portrait whose accuracy no one denies, though many denounce it as a piece of cynical realism, extrinsic to the play, and in all respects inartistic. It is, indeed, extrinsic to the plot, but not to the theme of the play, if the distinction is permissible. Dealing with false nobility, Mr. Pinero shows its more specious aspects in the Caryl family, its baser side in Lord Percy Lewiscourt. He is a balancing complement to the social picture, and he is drawn with such richness of humour that there is nothing crude or harsh in the realism of the portrait. Lord Percy, as played by Mr. Brookfield, and the cynical Q.C.

*Lord Percy  
Lewiscourt.*



in "Low Water," as played by Mr. Carton, are certainly among the most brilliant character-studies on the modern stage. Miss Maplebeck is a freshly drawn, if not very novel, figure, and Tom Jervoise, if somewhat conventional and untrue, is at least amusing. In the part of Lady Nell the author has made the mistake of sketching a character too strongly in the first act, and filling it in too faintly in the sequel; but it is surely not cynical to show the frowardness and ill-breeding of an inexperienced girl softened by the influence of sorrow and love.

*Mr. Pinero's  
"cynicism."*

Critics for whom I have the greatest respect assure me that they found "Lords and Commons" tedious. This silences debate, for no one can be argued into finding a play amusing. I can only say that I did not think it tedious, nor, apparently, did the majority of the audience. As for its cynicism, the accusation seems to me on a par with the old critical formula which docketed Thackeray as a cynic. Either the classification is false or cynic ceases to be a term of reproach. Mr. Pinero's theme is practically the old commonplace about hearts and coronets, simple faith and Norman blood, a sentimentalism, surely, rather than a cynicism. It is quite true that in this, as in



his other plays, he shows a healthy horror of the merely "sympathetic personage," to use Zola's phrase; but that is only to say that he tries to give his characters character. The cynic is he who maintains that this cannot be done without making them repellent.

The decline of opera-bouffe and burlesque has relegated Mr. Robert Reece and his collaborator Mr. H. B. Farnie to the background.

*Messrs. Reece  
and Farnie.*

"Kenilworth," at the Avenue, is the only one of their productions sufficiently successful to call for mention, and it owed its success mainly to the strength of the company engaged in it. Mr. Reece may be regarded as a victim to the burlesque mania which was at its height when he first came before the public. There is little doubt that his talents, had he cultivated them in other directions, would have fitted him for better things. There is no such element of pathos in the position of Mr. H. Paulton and Messrs. Stephens and Yardley, the most prominent caterers, for the moment, to what is left of the declining appetite for burlesque. These gentlemen have as yet shown no fitness for better things, but Messrs. Stephens and Yardley, at any rate, must be admitted to possess a certain amount of ability in the line they have adopted.

*Mr. Paulton.*

*Messrs.  
Stephens and  
Yardley.*

*Mr. Sims.*

“The Romany Rye,” as I have said above, was the latest production noticed in my review of the English drama of four years ago. It was the second of Mr. George R. Sims’ melodramas, and the last produced at the Princess’s Theatre. Since then he has migrated to the Adelphi, where he has produced two very successful melodramas, “In the Ranks” and “The Harbour Lights,” in collaboration with Mr. Pettitt, and a third, less successful, of his own unaided composition, entitled “The Last Chance.” Besides these plays he has written a pleasant operetta, “The Merry Duchess” (at the Royalty), with one or two light pieces for country companies; and, as already stated, he is understood to have collaborated with Mr. Sydney Grundy in “The Glass of Fashion.” It is to his melodramas, however, that he has devoted the best of his energies, and it is by these that he must stand or fall.

*Minor pieces.*

*The parting of  
the ways.*

In common with many other critics, I conceived great hopes of Mr. Sims after the production of “The Lights o’ London,” in September, 1881. In that play he stood, like Hercules, at the parting of the ways—on the one hand, Observation, on the other, Convention; here Actualism, there Theatricalism. His framework belonged to theatrical conven-

tion, his episodes and one or two of his characters he owed to actual observation. It was not the framework but the episodes which secured his success; therefore we were led to hope that he would turn aside from the broad road of convention, and choose the more arduous path of observation and nature. On the latter track he would have been a pioneer, the founder of a new school of English drama; whereas by choosing the facile descent of theatricalism he could at best hope to make up to, and possibly distance, Messrs. Meritt, Pettitt, and Harris, who had a good start of him. It seemed not altogether improbable that ambition and interest alike would lead him to attempt a new departure in the direction indicated by the better parts of his first great success.

Events have proved that we were sadly over-sanguine. I shall say nothing of the two plays written in collaboration with Mr. Pettitt. A few touches of dialogue alone revealed the individuality of Mr. Sims; for the rest, they belonged entirely to the Drury-Lane-Grecian school, and no more called for serious criticism than a play with pasteboard characters on a child's toy-stage. In the one the conventional British soldier, in the other the

*The facile descent.*

conventional British sailor, was adroitly put through his facings for the hundredth time amid the enthusiasm of pit and gallery. This was the whole end aimed at, and it was fully attained ; what more remains to be said ?

" *The Last  
Chance.*"

" *The Last Chance*," as a work of Mr. Sims' unaided genius, deserves closer consideration. Compared with "*The Lights o' London*," it was a sad falling-off. The fresh and genial episodes had almost disappeared, the novel and keenly observed characters had vanished entirely, leaving merely the *London Journal* framework, which, towards the end, did not even dovetail with anything like neatness. There was not a character in "*The Last Chance*" which had not done duty at the Grecian Theatre before ever Messrs. Meritt and Pettitt migrated to the West End. Of the two dockyard scenes, the one was excellent, the other absurd, but neither was welded into the fabric of the play. Not even Mr. Meritt would have dared to let the cotton-bale (or whatever it was) drop on Frank Daryll by pure chance ; he would have made the villain come along and tamper with the tackle, or disguise himself as an engineer and deliberately work the crane so as to crush the hero. I do not say this would have been any better art, but it would have been better

melodrama, and since Mr. Sims has cast in his lot with the melodramatists he should conform to their canons. Even the earthquake in "Claudian" was part of the curse; it did not drop in promiscuously out of mere malice. As for the last two acts, they were a hopeless muddle, deficient even in melodramatic vigour. The little girl in the hospital gardens was the one touch of nature in the later scenes, like Nell among the waxworks. "The Last Chance!" I said to myself as I left the theatre on the noisy but depressing first night, "It should have been 'The Lost Chance.'"

The play, in truth, was to me a grievous disappointment, for the very reason that I had entertained such high hopes as to the possible development of Mr. Sims' talent. Not even "In the Ranks" had persuaded me to accept his choice of conventionalism as final and irrevocable. I knew from his published writings that he had been studying "How the Poor Live," and, among other phases of London labour, had made himself familiar with the struggling world of the Docks. Then I heard that he had prepared a great drama for the Adelphi, to be called "Against the Tide" (a title subsequently abandoned), dealing with life down the river. Was it wonderful that, the

*The lost chance  
—a possible  
real-life  
drama,*

*of Dockland,*

wish being father to the thought, I figured to myself a play which should give a many-sided picture of the strange region of Dockland, so foreign to thousands of Londoners—a play which should concentrate within “the three hours’ traffick of the stage” so much of the life and manners of the denizens of these localities as should appreciably enlarge our knowledge and intensify our sympathies? For such a play a very simple plot would have sufficed. There would have been no room in it for the hackneyed complications in which Mr. Sims lost himself. The collaboration of the scene-painters would have been quite as important as in “The Last Chance,” but he and they would have chosen those aspects of Dockland, which it is possible to put satisfactorily on the stage (like the Dock Gates), and would have avoided scenes (such as the interior of the Docks) which become dwarfed and toy-like and ridiculous when placed on the boards. I do not say that a scene on the very wharves would be impossible, but it would have to be arranged very differently from Mr. Bruce Smith’s construction with its two or three absurd cock-boats and its irrelevant masts flapping about on the sky-borders. In the play I imagined there would have been room, too, for sensations, and even

fortuitous sensations, to show the perils which Dockland life is heir to. It is when it plunges down in the midst of an artificially-woven intrigue that such an accident as that of the cotton-bale seems so out of place; and then it was so utterly undeceptive into the bargain. In a real-life picture one or two mechanical sensations of this class would be quite justifiable, if only they were probable and effectively carried out. Would not the public go to see a play of this description, truthfully written, carefully put on the stage, ably acted? For my part I think they would much prefer it to Mr. Sims' threadbare romances of swaggering young gentlemen cast on the world without any trade or profession to turn to, and therefore (very naturally) reduced to beggary or soldiering, until some turn of fortune's wheel restores them to their former gracious state of luxurious idleness.

Let me give another instance of the sort of play which I had been rash enough to hope for from Mr. Sims' pen. Some three years ago, at this very Adelphi Theatre, there was produced a drama called "Love and Money," by Messrs. Charles Reade and Henry Pettitt. It was an absurd affair. The sensation scene—hero, heroine, and villain imprisoned in a coal-mine—  
*or of the coal country.*



was a piece of the most dismal claptrap. But it occurred to me in seeing it, and the thought has often come back to me since, "Now, if a man like Mr. G. R. Sims were to give us a serious, faithful, exact study of colliery life, what a genuine sensation it would be!" Think of the scenes—the village street, the miner's cottage (interior), the overseer's house or garden, the village tavern, the pit-head, the engine-room, the workings under two or three different aspects. What a chance for varied character, humorous and grim, noble and base! How the heroine—for that "sympathetic personage" need by no means be abolished—might stand out pure and white against her swarthy surroundings! What a thrilling sensation, or series of sensations, is ready made to hand! It seems to me nothing short of a marvel that no one has yet given us an even moderately faithful picture of the scene at a pit-mouth after an accident. Difficult? Of course it is difficult! But it has got to be done sooner or later, and there is not only a fortune, but a place in dramatic history, for the man who discovers the secret of putting this and similar aspects of every-day life solidly and convincingly upon the stage.

Mr. Sims seemed, at the commencement of



his career, to be feeling his way towards this secret; but while he wastes time and energy on bigamists from America, and Polish patriots, and wills, and abductions, and blackmailers, he will never discover it. The Dock Gate scene in "The Last Chance" was, as it were, a slight and timid study for a picture of the right sort; but then, it was mounted, like a rare etching, in such a prodigious wilderness of pasteboard! Why does he not abolish the gilt-and-tinsel mounting, and for once, as an experiment, devote the whole space at his command to a faithful real-life picture, founded on the studies he has recently been making? On the play-bill of "The Last Chance," now before me, there is a capital title for such a play. Let him call it "Blurton's Rents," and (taking a hint in drama from his farce of "Flats") lead us up floor by floor through one of the Westminster rookeries. To avoid a monotony of sordidness, he might give us scenes in St. James's Park, or on the Embankment, or in the gilded saloons of some wealthy "middleman"; but he should make his whole play, and not merely one or two scenes of it, illustrate directly or indirectly a closely-studied phase in the life of the people. Such a play would not be a work of high art, but it would be above the level of mere stage-

*or of the  
rookeries.*

carpentry. Photography may be a soulless pursuit, but at least its products are more artistic than the glaring picture-posters which so faithfully reflect the form and pressure of modern melodrama.

*Mr. Stephenson.*

As an adaptor and dialogue-writer, Mr. B. C. Stephenson deserves a place on the list of present-day playwrights. "Peril" and "Diplomacy," adaptations from Sardou, in which he collaborated with Mr. Clement Scott, are too well known to call for criticism, even if they did not fall outside the period under consideration. "Impulse," an adaptation from a little-known French play, was a great success at the St. James's, principally because the character of a good-natured nincompoop, played by Mr. Kendal, happened to take the public fancy. The first two acts were full of crudities, but the last three, which practically constituted one act in three scenes, were crisp, vigorous, and interesting. "A Woman of the World," adapted from Blumenthal's "Der Probepfeil," and recently produced at a Haymarket day-performance, contained some excellent writing, but was at once trivial and confused in plot.

*Mr. B. Thomas.*

Mr. Stephenson, too, has collaborated with Mr. Brandon Thomas (author of a clever little one-act play called "The Colour-Sergeant," pro-

duced at the Princess's) in an original comedy in three acts, produced at the Court Theatre under the title of "Comrades." It was a curiously unequal performance, very clever in parts, but lacking in constructive power, and defaced by a somewhat blustering spirit of Jingoism which pervaded it.

The ennobled Poet Laureate has within the past four years added two dramas to the roll of his achievements, one acted and not published, the other published and not acted. As Lord Tennyson has assured us that "Becket" is "not intended in its present form to meet the exigencies of our modern theatre," I need not enter at large into its theatrical qualities. There are several scenes which might be made effective on the stage, and, despite the above disclaimer, the poet has been curiously careful to "work in the female interest," to the no small detriment of the artistic unity of his poem; but on the whole "Becket" would probably be the most difficult and thankless of all Lord Tennyson's plays to adapt to "the exigencies of the modern theatre." It could not, however, be less adaptable than "The Promise of May," which its author designed specially for the boards. The third act contained the germs of a powerful drama, but the whole play was

*Lord Tennyson.*

*"Becket."*

*"The Promise of May."*

characterized by such a sublime indifference to the first rudiments of stagecraft, that to criticize it in detail would involve an apparent irreverence towards an illustrious poet, not more honoured than deserving of honour. So far as concerns Lord Tennyson's reputation, "The Promise of May" had best be forgotten; but its matter was so peculiar, and the circumstances of its reception so instructive, that I should like to attempt an analysis, not of the play itself, but of the mental attitude of the first-night audience.

*A historical  
first-night.*

It was pretty generally known that the play was to treat of religious scepticism, and this expectation probably divided the audience, at the outset, into three camps, a majority and two minorities. Of the minorities one trusted that Tennyson, like the street-preacher in *Punch*, would "warm up 'Uxley and Tyndall and that lot to rights;" the other hoped against hope that something like justice would be done to their own particular tenets; while the great majority, caring for none of these things, was gifted with the impartiality of indifferentism, warped only by the English bias in favour of respectability. The curtain rose, the play proceeded, and it was found that there was little or no dramatic interest to distract

attention from its ethics and metaphysics. The ethics turned out to be crude, the metaphysics feeble; and now the three camps resolved themselves into two, actuated towards the same end by very different motives. The unbelievers protested against puerile misrepresentations and misapplications of their ideas, and to them rallied the more intelligent of the indifferents, partly from the instinctive dislike for false logic seldom wholly absent from even the English mind, partly from a mere love of fair play. The less intelligent of the indifferents, on the other hand—the Philistines pure and simple—were shocked by the small respect shown for the decencies of society. Both the idea of the play and its dialogue were “unpleasant.” Even the little birds—animals held sacred in the mild poesy of Philistinism—were alluded to in a fashion repugnant to its sense of propriety. These feelings were shared by the more distinctly religious section of the audience, which was actuated to still deeper displeasure by the consciousness that such rough and unskilful handling of the matters in dispute could not possibly advance the good cause. Had unbelief been attacked with a stiletto or even with a club it would have been heartily content; but this beating with empty

bladders seemed an ineffectual and disappointing proceeding, making a great noise and bringing the object of attack into general notice, without inflicting the least practical damage upon it. Thus the general verdict was unanimously unfavourable.

*Its lesson—  
tendency with-  
out drama,  
impossible ;*

The whole affair may at first sight seem dispiriting to those who venture to hope for a serious drama in England. The intensity with which the audience seized upon the ideas and the mode of their expression, and condemned or ridiculed them quite apart from their dramatic appropriateness, may seem to confirm the fear that our public has not yet sufficient dramatic instinct to accept the impersonal discussion and ventilation of a modern question essential to a serious modern play. As the transpontine gods hiss the villain of a melodrama, sinking all consideration of his dramatic merits in the depth of their indignation at his moral defects, so even our most enlightened audiences, whenever a serious question is touched upon, insist on treating all utterances on the subject as if they were the personal opinions of a party orator, and not the constituent elements of a work of mimetic art. The Marquis of Queensberry, indeed, carried this tendency so far that he could not even give vent to his indignation

through the ordinary safety-valves of theatrical feelings, but must needs openly explode in attempted argument with the dramatist or his personages. Is it because of our parliamentary training and habits that we cannot hear an idea mooted "in mimic sport" without forthwith moving an amendment? But before we draw a too decided conclusion from the events of those animated evenings at the Globe, we must examine the circumstances a little more closely. If we are to tolerate an idea on account of its dramatic appropriateness, there must be some dramatic character and situation for it to be appropriate to. Did the Laureate provide this requisite? Clearly not. There was not enough strength of drama or consistency of character in his work to support, before any audience in the world, the crudities of idea and expression which it contained. What the public is accustomed to is drama without tendency. What some of us would like to see it accept is drama with tendency. What the Laureate offered it was tendency without drama, which is all right in the pulpit or on the platform, but all wrong in the theatre. Thus the fate of "The Promise of May" is in itself no argument against the possibility of a serious drama finding a public even in England.

*drama with  
tendency—  
possible?*



It was not a drama but a bad sermon delivered without the privilege of the pulpit, which protects so many similar utterances from similar damnation.

With all his wonderful gifts, Lord Tennyson is neither a skilful dramatist nor a profound thinker. Do not let us conclude, from his failure to deal successfully with the most difficult and dangerous of all possible topics, that the public is entirely unripe for a more skilful dramatic treatment of the hundred less absorbing but still very important moral and social questions of the day.

*Mr. Wills.*

The past four years have not added to the reputation of Mr. W. G. Wills. He has produced at the Globe an unskilful dramatization of "Jane Eyre," and at the Lyceum a worse than unskilful, an unintelligent adaptation of "Faust," in which Mephistopheles becomes a sort of scarlet Scapin, and Gretchen is made to bombast out blank verse like a tragedy queen. Neither of these productions calls for examination in detail. "Claudian," on the other hand, of which Mr. Wills wrote the "poetry," while Mr. Herman constructed the plot, was so successful and so belauded that it may be worth while to consider with some care a work whose philosophy has been declared, by



a critic so widely revered as Mr. Ruskin, to be "entirely right."

A curious essay might be written on the theology of melodrama, with illustrations from recent productions at the Princess's Theatre. One does not, indeed, look for great clearness of thought in this branch of art. Melodrama may be defined as illogical tragedy, in which causes and effects are systematically disproportionate, and the hero is the plaything of special providences. Still there are degrees of illogicality, and providences, like the editions of an evening newspaper, may be either special or extra-special. At the Princess's they are extra-special. The theology of the playwrights who supply this popular stage is characterized by what may be called a cheerful pessimism, or, in other words, a naïve stoicism. They say with Edgar—

*Melodramatic  
theology.*

"Men must endure  
Their going hence, even as their coming hither ;  
Effect is all."

The hero of "The Silver King," on reading that the train in which he is supposed to have been escaping from the detectives has come into collision with some trucks containing petroleum, whereby its passengers have been slowly calcined, at once falls on his knees in

*"The Silver  
King."*

the middle of the stage, with the cry of "Thank God!" and proceeds to utter a fervent apostrophe of gratitude. Neither he, the author, nor the audience, bestows a single thought on the carbonized passengers, slowly roasted in order to aid the escape of a drunkard who has by the merest chance missed becoming a murderer. One is reminded of a passage in Ibsen's "Peer Gynt," where a remarkable special providence is treated in a similar spirit. The hero, with a party of friends, has landed from a steam yacht on the coast of Barbary. His companions learn that he has on board the yacht a cargo of arms which he intends to sell to the Turks, to aid them in putting down a Christian rising. Against this their sense of humanity rebels; and when their host has retired for a siesta in a palm-grove, they row off to the yacht and take possession of it. Peer Gynt awakes to find his yacht steaming gaily away in the offing, and himself left beggared upon the desert coast. He bursts out into a storm of reproaches against providence, when suddenly an explosion is heard, and he sees the yacht blown into a thousand fragments. His friends' treachery is now clearly a special interposition on his behalf, and, recognizing it in that light, he breaks off

*An extra-special providence.*

his torrent of imprecations with the reflection—

“God’s well-disposed towards me after all—  
But economical?—no, that he isn’t!”

In the same way the melodramatist’s providence always proves itself in the end well-disposed towards the hero, but economical of the life and happiness of others it certainly is not. Even the hero has often to be thankful for small mercies. When Wilfrid Denver, at the end of “The Silver King,” turned up his eyes and thanked the Power whose “loving-kindness had been around him all the days of his life,” one could not help reflecting that the whole Denver family had been having an extremely unpleasant time of it for the past three years, and that, if a text was necessary at all, something after the fashion of “Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth” would have been much more to the point.

“Claudian” reduces this tendency to an absurdity. It is the old tragedy of the Wandering Jew or of the Flying Dutchman, turned into melodrama; robbed, that is to say, of its logical and poetical consistency. Ahasuerus, in the mediæval legend, insults the Saviour and is cursed with restless, everlasting life. There is only one interposition of super-

“Claudian;”  
or, the Locomotive Upas-tree.

natural power, and the punishment falls on the guilty and on him alone. So is it with Vanderdecken. His crew are indeed involved in his fate, but they may be presumed to have shared his impiety as well. In the modern version, which Wagner borrowed from Heine, and Heine, perhaps, from Fitzball, his salvation is made to depend upon a woman's faith; and if death is his only true salvation, and he takes her with him to his rest, her fate is yet nobly self-determined, and therefore truly tragic. Even in the common sea-legends, which make of the Flying Dutchman a forerunner of death and disaster, he is not considered as their cause, any more than the petrel is the cause of the storm or the vulture of the battle. He is simply "dreeing his weird," which is to haunt the tempest, and live, undying, in an atmosphere of danger and death.

*The curse.*

Not so Claudian. His doom is not one great miracle, but a series of ever-recurring wonders. The guilt is his, the punishment falls on every one but himself. "Thy course," says the Holy Clement (there is surely a touch of irony in the name)—

"Thy course like baneful star across the sky  
Shall blight and wither all upon thy track.  
The innocent sunshine shall die out before thee,  
And the black shadow of misfortune follow.

“Thy soul shall thirst and famish to do good  
And try in vain to do it.  
The happiness, as pure as crystal well,  
Touched by thy lips shall muddy at its source.  
Thy pity shall envenom what 'twould soothe ;  
Thy charity breed pestilence and ruin,  
Until that day the vaulted rocks shall split,  
A gulf be widened betwixt thee and me ;  
Then thou shalt choose either to die, or live  
Accurst till doom.”

It is all very well to say that the misery he spreads around re-acts upon himself ; this may be very true, but it is small comfort to those whom he “ blights and withers,” “ envenoms,” and strikes down with pestilence. The providence which, to punish a man for killing a monk, makes him a sort of locomotive upastree, and turns him loose upon society for a whole century, may perhaps be well-meaning, but economical it certainly is not. The end is ridiculously disproportionate to the magnitude of the means. One is reminded of the test by which Tantalus tried the omniscience of the gods, when, instead of merely putting a little arsenic in the turtle soup, he fricasseed his own son Pelops. Until I saw “ Claudian,” this had always seemed to me the acme of reckless wastefulness in the application of means to ends.

In dealing with legendary themes our aim

*The mills of  
God*

should surely be to humanize and not to brutalize them. There is in "Claudian" a calm, nay, a reverential, acceptance of monstrous injustice in the action of the higher powers, which we do not find in the crudest mediæval myths. It is to be observed that Claudian has not, like Faust, sold himself to the Evil One. It is distinctly through the intervention of the powers above, and not of those below, that he is sent forth to carry calamity, destruction, and misery wherever he goes. The authors leave us no loophole of escape from the theory that it is "the mills of God" which grind so "exceeding small." Claudian's redemption is the direct object of this century of agony for his innocent surroundings. That the world may be to him a purgatory, it is made a hell to every one else. As a railway train was roasted to save Wilfrid Denver's life, so a whole city has to be horribly destroyed for the ultimate salvation of Claudian's soul. At first even he is staggered by this culmination to the hundred years of horror. "Impavidum feriunt ruinæ" cannot literally be said of him. But presently a light breaks in upon him. He sees in this crowning calamity a crowning mercy. The "vaulted rocks have split," and he is going straight to heaven.

*as worked at  
the Princess's,*

The fact that the chasm is filled with the bodies of men and women does not seem to give him pause. He "chooses death," and a flash of thunderless lightning promptly descends, killing him, as such miraculous electricity naturally would, after an interval of five minutes for recitation. At last he dies in the glory of limelight and the odour of sanctity, and we are given to understand that his expiation is complete. Was the game worth the candle? is a question which does not seem to have occurred to either authors or audience. We read in the legend of St. Sylvester that Constantine, while yet a Pagan, was attacked with leprosy, and was recommended by the priests to try as a remedy a bath in the warm blood of three thousand babies; but the emperor replied, "Far better it is that I should die than cause the death of these innocents." No such weak humanitarian scruples trouble the breasts of Claudian or Messrs. Wills and Herman. They seem to say, like Albany in "Lear":—

*in truth the  
mills of Wills.*

This judgment of the heavens, that makes us tremble,  
Touches us not with pity."

They accept the blight and venom, the pestilence and earthquake, as the "ways of

God," which need no justification to man. I think a protest is called for in the name of common sense, if not of piety. Such means to such an end are not the "ways of God," but merely the ways of melodramatic playwrights.

*Melodramatic  
optimism the  
grimmiest  
pessimism.*

It may be said that audiences go to a spectacular play not for theology, but for spectacle, and that such a transparently nonsensical conception of the methods of providence cannot affect for good or ill the action of any human being. This is true, in a sense. No one believes for a moment that such things ever happened, or ever could happen, except in the Realm of Melodrama. There they are matters of every-day occurrence. The eccentricities of providence in "Claudian" are only notable for their vastness, and for the utter complacency with which the authors treat them. Without the *deus ex machinâ*, whether he arrive in the shape of an earthquake or of "Hawkshaw the Detective," melodrama could not exist. My plea is only that he need not be treated with such superfluous respect as is shown him by Messrs. Wills and Herman. One word of rebellion—one hint that the grim pessimism of their conception is regarded by themselves as anything short of the most



roseate optimism—would do much to clear the somewhat stifling moral atmosphere.

Mr. Herman's strength as a constructor of drama clearly lies in his prologues. The statement of the problem in "Claudian," as in "The Silver King," is strong and striking; the errors lie in the working out. "Claudian" is full of feeblenesses—motiveless miracles, without even the claptrap effectiveness which in melodrama excuses such trifling with the order of nature. But the saddest error of the play is the feebleness with which the authors work up to their great effect of the earthquake. It is a lost opportunity, a possibility wasted. A profound and impressive effect might be obtained from a vivid picture of the signs and omens, the vague unrest, the growing presentiment of a mysterious doom, said to precede these mighty catastrophes. A skilful dramatist, by the cumulative power of small touches, might have worked up his audience to a state of breathless anticipation. Messrs. Wills and Herman make no such attempt. At the beginning of the short scene in which the catastrophe occurs they introduce a young woman (else unheard-of in the play), who recites a narrative of some former earthquake, and states her conviction that another is impending. There is no gra-

*The earthquake—a lost opportunity.*

dation of terror, no hush of foreboding awe. When the sensation comes it is effective enough, but it lacks human interest. We feel no more sympathetic excitement than when a penny dropped through a slit sets in motion an ingenious piece of clockwork. Somewhat similar, yet very different, is the effect in "Sardanapalus," when the courtiers, in his great banquet-hall, hail the monarch as a god. There is a crash of thunder, a flash of lightning, and in the weird semi-darkness which follows we see the revellers struck prostrate to the earth, while Sardanapalus, with Myrrha clinging to him, stands awe-struck yet half defiant on the lofty steps of his throne. This differs from the earthquake in "Claudian" as dramatic poetry differs from stage-carpentry. Even if I could agree with Mr. Ruskin that Messrs. Wills and Herman's ethics are "entirely right," I should none the less have to maintain that their dramatic construction is entirely wrong.

*Summing-up.*

Is the theatre attracting, and does it deserve to attract, more and more attention from the educated and thoughtful portion of the community? These were the questions which, at the outset of this essay, I undertook to consider.

The first, a question of fact, practically answered itself in the affirmative; and I have now tried to provide some data upon which to found a rational answer to the second, the question of taste. The reader must determine for himself what that answer shall be. If he regrets the decline of opera-bouffe; if he laments the decease of cup-and-saucer comedy; if he thinks frank farce and popular melodrama utterly hopeless and despicable forms of art; if he holds Messrs. Jones, Grundy, and Pinero inferior both as craftsmen and as artists to Messrs. Robertson, Byron, and Burnand—then he will doubtless conclude that the theatre does not deserve the increased attention it commands. If, on the other hand, he agrees with me in believing that the changes and developments I have indicated are on the whole for the better, he will let the dead past bury its dead without too much lamentation, and will look with sympathy upon the stage of the present—and of the future.

It may be asked why I have said little or nothing of the actors of the day. My reasons are twofold. In the first place, my survey is confined to a space of four years, during which there has been little change either for better or worse in the personnel of the stage. In the

*"The play's  
the thing"—  
not the players.*

second place, even if I had been comparing more distant periods, I believe that the place of any given age upon the scale of development is to be determined by the plays produced, not by the actors who perform them. From the days of Betterton downwards the stage has never been without an ample complement of admirable actors. The tastes of different times force talent into different forms, but I believe that its actual amount is pretty constant. As theatres increase and "the profession" multiplies, the average of endowment is perhaps somewhat lowered; but, putting out of account transcendent genius like that of Garrick or Mrs. Siddons, I do not believe that the aggregates of histrionic talent in any two periods differ so much as to enable us to weigh them against each other with much hope of arriving at a profitable result. We have now one very distinguished actor, Mr. Henry Irving, one really great actress, Mrs. Kendal, and a whole host of admirable melodramatic actors, character actors, and comedians. Putting aside, as aforesaid, two, or at most three, heaven-born geniuses, I doubt if the stage has ever been richer in talent than it is at present; but neither do I believe that it has ever been very much poorer. If this theory be correct, it

is clear that in estimating advance or retrogression we must fix our attention not upon actors, but upon plays. The plays of a period shape the actors, moulding them to lower or to higher uses; but actors can neither make nor mar a dramatic literature.

M. Auguste Vitu, in the first article of his "Mille et Une Nuits du Théâtre," has the following pregnant saying: "On peut discerner, dans l'œuvre d'un observateur, d'un moraliste, tel que doit être l'écrivain dramatique qui n'a pas abandonné, comme Scribe et ceux de son école, tout commerce avec la pensée, trois choses parfaitement distinctes, quoique se confondant sans cesse et concourant au même but: une peinture, un jugement, un idéal." Until the period of what I may call, for argument's sake, the dramatic revival, the English drama, belonging to the school of Scribe in this, if in this alone, had given up all attempt at thought. It was, as Mr. Arnold said, fantastic, quite out of touch with the realities of life, a sort of "chimaera bombinans in vacuo." That stage, it seems to me, we have now passed, and the public is beginning to demand more and more imperatively that the dramatist shall be, not indeed a moralist (that may come later on), but an observer, and shall

*"A painting,  
a judgment, an  
ideal."*

give in his work, not yet a judgment or an ideal, but a painting. This is, in sum, my reason for believing that there is vitality in the English drama, and that, on the whole, WE ARE ADVANCING.

18th March, 1886.

### THE CENSORSHIP OF THE STAGE.

FOR our present censorship of plays we have to thank all three estates of the realm. It was created by the Crown in the sixteenth century, and new life was breathed into it by the Houses of Parliament in the eighteenth. To understand its true nature, it is necessary that we should shortly trace its development.

In the reign of Henry VIII. the drama began to be secularized. The monks were no longer the sole impresarios. The moralities, fecundated by germs from the Latin comedy, gave birth to plays in which real life was imitated, however rudely, no longer under the veil of symbolism. At the same time the Renaissance love of pageantry penetrated to England, along with the material prosperity which it presupposed. The nobles, enriched by the spoils of the monasteries, took under their protection the arts which the monasteries had fostered. In 1544, and probably earlier, the amusements

*Tudor absolutism: Henry VIII.*

of the Court were placed under the control of a "Magister jocorum, revellorum et mascorum." In 1549 the representation of all plays and interludes was prohibited throughout the realm for a space of three months, on account of their seditious tendencies. Three years later a special license of the Privy Council was declared necessary for any dramatic performance in the English tongue. From this time forward both players and playwrights were harassed intermittently by different dominions and powers; the players, as rogues and vagabonds, by the civic authorities; the playwrights, on political or religious grounds, by the Star Chamber and the Privy Council. In 1581 we find a commission issued by Elizabeth to "Edmunde Tilney, Maister of our Revells," empowering him to call before him all "plaiers with their playmakers," and to make them present or recite all "Comedies, Trajedies, Enterludes, or what other Showes soever . . . as they shall have in readines, or meane to sett forth;" whereupon he is to "order and reforme, auctoris and put down, as shalbe thought meete or unmeete unto himselfe," and in case of disobedience is to "commytt" the offenders "to Warde," there to remain until such time as the said Edmund Tilney shall

*Elizabeth's  
"Maister of  
our Revells."*



think their expiation sufficient. An attempt of the playwrights, eight years later, to enter into the Marprelate controversy (of course on the side of Prelates), was promptly suppressed. Throughout the reigns of Elizabeth and her successors censorship seems to have been intermittently and capriciously exercised, with no set forms or fixed principles.<sup>1</sup> The theatre, with all its popularity, existed, in theory at least, upon sufferance. A general right of interference and suppression seems to have been held so entirely a matter of course, that there was no difficulty in applying it to individual cases in the most off-hand and informal fashion. The Crown, while it sometimes protected the players against the assaults of bumbledom, and the more justifiable hostility of puritanism, took their religion and politics under the wing of its own prerogative. Court historians can tell us when the Master of the Revels merged in the Lord Chamberlain;<sup>2</sup> it

*The theatre  
existed on  
sufferance.*

<sup>1</sup> There is a short Act of 3 James I. (c. 21), by which it is provided that any one who in a stage play, interlude, show, Maygame, or pageant, shall jestingly or profanely speak or use the holy name of God, or of Christ Jesus, or of the Holy Ghost, or of the Trinity, shall forfeit the sum of ten pounds, half to the king, half to the informer.

<sup>2</sup> Probably not until the passing of the Act of 1737. The first recorded instance of interference by the Lord

is enough for us to note that the latter's jurisdiction over the drama is a survival from the good old times of Tudor absolutism.

*Charles I.: Sir  
H. Herbert's  
note-book.*

Chance has preserved to us the private note-book of Sir Henry Herbert,<sup>1</sup> Master of the Revels under Charles I., which throws a curious light upon the mysteries of his art. In August, 1623, he allows "an olde play called Winter's Tale . . . on Mr. Hemmings his word that there was nothing profane added or reformed." This he does without fee. In April, 1627, he receives £5 from Mr. Hemmings for forbidding the Red Bull Company to play Shakespeare's plays. A play of Massinger's, apparently lost, is prohibited in January, 1630, because it contained such dangerous matter as the deposing of a King

*Massinger.*

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Chamberlain is in 1624, when he was ordered by the king to remit a penalty inflicted by the Privy Council on the players who had produced Middleton's "Game of Chess." (See Bullen's Middleton, vol. i. p. lxxxi.) After this the two offices seem to have exercised concurrent jurisdiction, though the Master of the Revels was no doubt theoretically subordinate to the Lord Chamberlain. In some instances we even find the Lord Chamberlain prohibiting the publication of plays.—J. P. Collier, "Parliamentary Report," 1832, vii.

<sup>1</sup> Prolegomena to Malone's "Shakespeare," Ed. 1821, vol. iii. 229.

of Portugal. "I had my fee notwithstanding," adds Sir Henry, "which belongs to me for reading itt over, and ought to be brought always with the booke." Shirley's play of "The Ball" comes near being prohibited in November, 1632, because in it "there were divers personated so naturally, both of lords and others of the Court, that I took it ill." The offensive matter was promptly altered, but Sir Henry still thinks it necessary to excuse his leniency by noting "the first that offends in this kind, of poets or players, shall be sure of publique punishment." Next year, however, Shirley regains favour with his play of "The Young Admiral." It "may serve," says the Censor, "for a patterne to other poetts," who will be encouraged by the favour bestowed on it, "to pursue this beneficial and cleanly way of poetry." In May, 1633, the part of Vitruvius Hoop is wholly struck out of "The Tale of the Tubb," as being a libel upon Inigo Jones. In the same year Sir Henry receives from Christopher Beeston, manager of the Queen's Players, £3 for the license of "an ould play called Hymens Holliday," and £1 for some alterations in it; whereon he adds, "Meetinge with him at the ould Exchange, he gave my wife a payre of gloves, that cost him at least

*Shirley.**Jonson.*

twenty shillings." Master Christopher Beeston was evidently wise in his generation; more so, at any rate, than his brother William, who in 1640 is committed to the Marshalsey for playing a play without a license. "The play I cald for, and forbiddinge the playinge of it, keepe the booke, because it had relation to the passages of the K.'s journey to the Northe, and was complaynd of by his M.tye to mee, with commande to punish the offenders."

*A royal censor.* The paternal interest taken by Charles I. in the drama is curiously exemplified in this note-book. It is well known that he suggested to Shirley the plot of "The Gamester;" but it appears that if he was ready with doctrine he was at least as diligent in reproof and correction: "This morning (says Sir Henry Herbert), being the 9th of January, 1633, the kinge was pleasd to call me into his withdrawinge chamber to the windowe, wher he went over all that I had croste in Davenants play-booke, and allowing of *faith* and *slight* to bee asseverations only, and no oathes, markt them to stande. . . . The kinge is pleased to take *faith*, *death*, *slight*, for asseverations, and no oaths, to which I doe humbly submit as my master's judgment; but under favour conceive them to be oaths, and enter them

*Oaths or  
asseverations?*

here, to declare my opinion and submission.”<sup>1</sup> This entry is almost as pathetic as George Colman’s scruples about the use of the word “Angel,” to be hereafter alluded to. On another occasion, however, when Charles I. deigned to take the Censor’s blue pencil in his own august hand, Sir Henry’s sensitive conscience went entirely with his master’s judgment. The play was “The King and the Subject,” by Massinger, and contained the following lines, spoken by Don Pedro, King of Spain, to his subjects :—

*Massinger  
again.*

“Monys? Wee’le rayse supplies what ways we please,  
And force you to subscribe to blanks, in which  
We’le mulct you as wee shall thinke fitt. The Cæsars  
In Rome were wise, acknowledginge no lawes  
But what their swords did ratifye, the wives  
And daughters of the senators bowinge to  
Their wills, as deities,” &c.

In the year 1638 this passage had indeed an unpleasant relevance to certain measures of finance and government nearer home than Spain. Sir Henry accordingly transcribes it at length in his note-book, “for ever to bee remembered by my son and those that cast their eyes on it, in honour of Kinge Charles,

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<sup>1</sup> Charles II., being reprovèd by a courtier for swearing, replied, “Your martyr swore twice more than ever I did.” Malone, “Prolegomena,” iii. 235.

my master, who, readinge over the play at Newmarket, set his marke upon the place with his owne hande, and in thes words: *This is too insolent, and to bee changed.*"

"*The war began.*"

So much for our excellent Sir Henry. I shall transcribe only two more entries, the one characteristic, the other pathetic. The first is this: "[1642, June] Received of Mr. Kirke, for a new play which I burnt for the ribaldry and offense that was in it, 2*l.* 0. 0." There is a promptitude and decision about this course of action, eminently characteristic of irresponsible criticism. The second entry, only two months later, runs thus mournfully: "Here ended my allowance of plaies, for the war began in Aug. 1642."

*The Restoration: the two patents.*

The Parliament and the Protectorate dispensed with a censorship by dispensing with plays. At the Restoration, matters were placed on a new footing. In the patents<sup>1</sup> both of Killigrew and Davenant we read that "forasmuch as manie playes formerly acted doe conteine severll prophane, obscene and scurrulous passages, and the women's part therein have byn acted by men in the habit of

<sup>1</sup> Against which the Master of the Revels (Sir H. Herbert) ineffectually protested. Malone, "Prolegomena," iii. 246.

woemen," therefore the masters and governors of the respective companies are to expunge any passages "offensive to pietie or good manners," and to see that women's parts are henceforth acted by women—a regulation to which the attention of our purveyors of burlesque might with advantage be directed. The patentees being looked upon as officers of the Court, and the players as His Majesty's or the Duke of York's servants, this ordinance again places the drama under the tutelage of the dignitary who presided over the royal amusements. It would be interesting to know how this censorship worked, and what passages, in the age of Sedley and Rochester, were objected to as "prophane, obscene and scurrulous." The information, however, would be more curious than edifying or important, and as I am not writing a history of the censorship, I shall not attempt to collect it. The object of the theatre, as stated in both patents, is to provide "not only harmless delight, but useful and instructive representations of human life, to such of our good subjects as shall resort to the same." How far the Court censorship secured this nobly-stated end, is known to all who have even glanced into the dramatic literature of the period.

*"Pietie and  
good manners."*



*Jeremy Collier.* In 1698 Jeremy Collier published his "Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage," and succeeded in arousing, or perhaps merely in expressing, the indignation of the awakening middle classes. The censorship, whose nature it is to come in "a bad second" at the tail of public opinion, at once became moral and vigilant. In his newborn ardour the Master of the Revels even went the length of finding political tendency in Shakespeare. When Colley Cibber sent in his adaptation of "Richard III." for license, it was returned with the first act deleted at one blow!<sup>1</sup> The reason stated was that the murder of Henry VI. by Richard, which Cibber had interpolated from the earlier play, might possibly awaken sympathy with the banished King James, then living at St. Germain's. In vain did Cibber protest. The Censor had no leisure to weigh particular scenes and phrases, or sift what was inoffensive from what was dangerous. "Off with his head!—so much for Buckingham," he cried; and for several years the play had to stagger along as best it might in this truncated condition. Cibber, however, had his revenge. In 1718 George I. granted

*Cibber's  
"Richard III."*

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<sup>1</sup> Cibber's "Apology for his Life," chap. viii.



to Sir Richard Steele a patent exempting him and his assigns from the authority of the Master of the Revels. Cibber was one of these assigns; and on the Censor claiming his fee of forty shillings for every play produced, whether it passed through his hands or not, the patentees contested his right with complete success.

Ten years later occurred the events to which the censorship in its modern form may trace its rise. No one who now reads Gay's "Beggar's Opera" will find in it any violently seditious tendency. It is a satiric extravaganza, reminding us now of Gulliver, now of Mr. Gilbert, gross enough, indeed, but not more so than the taste of the time permitted.<sup>1</sup> Nor was it the coarseness of the dialogue which made it offensive in high places; it was the repeated and really witty onslaughts on the venality of politicians and the general corruption of the parliamentary world. The town seized upon these



*Origin of the  
modern censor-  
ship.*

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<sup>1</sup> In 1772 Sir John Fielding wrote to Colman, then manager of Covent Garden, advising him not to perform "The Beggar's Opera," as it tended to increase the number of thieves. The answer was as follows: "Mr. Colman's compts to Sir J. F., he does not think *his* the *only* house in *Bow Street* where thieves are hardened and encouraged, and will persist in continuing the representation of that admirable satire 'The Beggar's Opera.'" Genest, iii. 223.

allusions with a delight which sent them home barbed to their mark, and the success of the Newgate pastoral at Covent Garden was such as to make "Gay rich and Rich gay." The mischief was done before Walpole and his henchmen could interfere to prevent it; but they determined that the attack should not be repeated. Consequently, when Gay wrote a sequel under the title of "*Polly*," equally pungent in its satire, though inferior in other respects, the licenser, on a hint from the Ministry, insisted on its absolute suppression. The public, whose appetite had been whetted by "*The Beggar's Opera*," was very indignant, and the sale of the printed play put £1,100 into Gay's pocket. Public indignation, however was not so loud-voiced then as now. The time for effectual invective against political venality was not yet come, by many a year. The disease had to reach its height under another King and another Minister, when an office was opened at Whitehall for the bare-faced bribery of the "King's friends." One almost wonders that Walpole, in his cynical security, did not let Gay and his admirers have their laugh out in peace.

For the moment, the fate of "*Polly*" rather encouraged than depressed the dramatic satir-

ists of the day. At their head was one Henry Fielding, the youngest but most brilliant graduate of Grub Street. In many plays, but especially in "Pasquin: a Dramatick Satire on the Times," he had favoured the town with unmistakable variations on the theme which had made "The Beggar's Opera" so popular. At last, in a satiric medley called "The Historical Register for the Year 1736," he placed on the stage a personage who, under the name of "Quidam," was clearly intended for Walpole himself, and represented him distributing purses to patriotic legislators. This was not to be borne. It was even whispered that worse remained behind, and that it was the intention of Foote to apply his powers of mimicry to a caricature of the Minister's august person. The authority of the censorship must clearly be reasserted and defined, and scribblers taught to bridle their "licentious" pens. At this moment a providential incident occurred. An anonymous farce, called "The Golden Rump," was sent to Giffard, the manager of Goodman's Fields, who found it so grossly treasonable and profane that he took it straight to Sir Robert Walpole. There were not wanting those who roundly asserted that the Prime Minister did not then see it for the first time, it having

*Fielding and  
Walpole.*

*"The Golden  
Rump."*

10 *Geo. II. c. 19.*

been written at his instigation for the purpose of stirring up the temporary scare in St. Stephen's to which he trusted for carrying the measure he designed. Be this as it may, he compensated Giffard for the possible loss incurred through his loyalty, and nothing more was ever heard of the farce, except within the walls of Parliament, where members were treated to an alarming anthology of its seditious and profane passages. On the wave of indignation thus excited, he easily carried through the Act (10 Geo. II. c. 19), which established our censorship practically in its present form. It was ostensibly intended to "explain and amend" an Act of Anne relating to "rogues, vagabonds, and sturdy beggars," with which it had in fact nothing whatever to do. At least fourteen days before the production of any theatrical entertainment or part of one, a copy was to be forwarded to the Lord Chamberlain, in whom was vested absolute and final power to suppress the whole or any part of it, while a penalty of £50 was imposed for any breach of his orders. So far as we know, the only voice raised against this measure was that of Lord Chesterfield, in a speech which, Mr. Austin Dobson suggests, may possibly have been inspired by Fielding.

His lordship protested against the hurrying through of such a questionable measure at the very end of a session, asserted that the common law of the land supplied an ample check upon any undue freedom of the stage, dwelt upon the injustice and impolicy of gagging the most effective public censor of folly and vice, and then went straight to the heart of the whole matter in the following admirable words: "But granting it necessary, my lords, which I am far from thinking, to make a new law for restraining the licentiousness of the stage; yet I shall never be for establishing such a power as is proposed by this Bill. If poets and players are to be restrained, let them be restrained as other subjects are, by the known laws of their country; if they offend, let them be tried, as every Englishman ought to be, by God and their country. Let us not subject them to the arbitrary will and pleasure of any one man. A power lodged in the hands of a single man, to judge and determine without limitation, control, or appeal, is a sort of power unknown to our laws, and inconsistent with our constitution; it is a higher and more absolute power than we trust even to the king himself; I must therefore think we ought not to vest any such power in his majesty's lord chamberlain."

*Lord Chesterfield's protest.*

*"Unknown to our laws, inconsistent with our constitution."*

Eloquent, logical, irrefutable as it was, this protest produced no effect. The Bill became law on June 21, 1737, and "with its passing," says Mr. Dobson, "Fielding's career as a dramatic author practically closed."

*Censorship at  
first vexatious,*

It is useless to speculate whether English literature lost or gained by the gagging of Fielding's Aristophanic muse. The loss, at any rate, cannot have been great. The time had not come for a new blossoming of the drama, but for an efflorescence of fiction. I may as well state at once my belief that during the eighteenth century, and, indeed, until our own day, the censorship did not seriously impede the development of the English drama. It was, as we shall see, vexatious and futile. It interfered indefensibly with freedom of speech and rights of literary property. It did no good and, in individual instances, it inflicted grave injustice. On the whole, however, it can scarcely be argued that the drama suffered greatly from its restraint. The conditions of the times were not favourable to the development of a great and serious national drama. Had there been sufficient vitality and power of growth in the organism, it would long ago have burst the bonds imposed upon it. I believe, in short, that, until quite recently, the censorship was vexatious rather

than noxious. Now, on the other hand, the *now noxious*, repressive tendency which was once merely potential is becoming actual, and will grow more galling with every year that passes. There are indications, faint but surely not fallacious, that the rising flood of modern thought will one day sweep the English drama out of the eddy in which it has so long been whirling, to carry it forward on the broad current of the age. It will then need quite other pilotage than that of a Court Censor, whose dominant desire must necessarily be to get it safely anchored in the placid pool of prejudice and convention.

The new Censor did not let his powers lie dormant. He determined to show at once that he was no house-dog in mosaic, but a real live Cerberus,<sup>1</sup> ready to scent sedition afar off. Already, in 1739, Brooke's "Gustavus Vasa" was prohibited while it was actually in rehearsal, because, as Genest says, "there was a good deal in it about liberty," which, in a free

*Brooke's  
"Gustavus  
Vasa."*

<sup>1</sup> Literally three-headed, for a play about which there is any doubt is referred by the Reader to the Head of the Department, and by him to the Lord Chamberlain himself, who finally accepts or rejects it. See evidence of N. Macdonald before Commission of 1852-53, and of Hon. Spencer Brabazon Ponsonby before Commission of 1866.



country, was not to be endured. The play, with a preface, was printed by subscription, at five shillings a copy, and brought in over £1,000 to the author. This was the occasion of Dr. Johnson's ironical "Vindication of the Licenser of the Stage from the malicious and scandalous aspersions of Mr. Brooke," a masterly political tract, directed, however, against the Government in general rather than against the Licenser in particular. James Thomson, surely as inoffensive a playwright as ever lived, was the next victim. He was known to be on friendly terms with the Prince of Wales, and certain passages in "Edward and Eleanora," a mediæval version of the story of Alkestis, were supposed to allude to the estrangement between Frederic and his father. The suspected lines were eight in number, but they apparently leavened the mass, for it was absolutely prohibited after it had been placed in rehearsal and advertised for production. This was in 1739, and the unhappy drama did not see the stage until 1775. So evil was poor Thomson's reputation in the Lord Chamberlain's office, that a friend of his, who had copied "Edward and Eleanora," was surprised to find a tragedy of his own prohibited, for no better reason than that it was in the same handwriting as that incendiary production.

*Thomson's  
"Edward and  
Eleanora."*



This, at least, is the account of Thomson's biographer,<sup>1</sup> but as the hero of the play was Arminius (Hermann), it, too, probably contained "a good deal about liberty."

It would be tedious to follow the censorship through its eccentric course down to the end of last century. Among its best known vagaries are the maltreatment of Reed's "Register Office,"<sup>2</sup> from which two of the best characters were summarily cut out, and the objection<sup>3</sup> to Macklin's "Man of the World," which had to be sent up for license three times before it found its way to the stage. By the beginning of the present century, propriety had become the ruling consideration of the Censor, though he still kept a watchful eye on politics. Mr. Larpent, the Censor who preceded George Colman, vetoed "Wat Tyler," a comic opera by Cumberland, although, as Genest says, "certainly no one but a dog in office could suspect Cumberland of writing anything of a bad political tendency." It was the same official who, being himself a Methodist, insisted on the

*Minor in-  
eptitudes.*

*Mr. Larpent*

<sup>1</sup> "Life of Thomson," p. xxvi., by Rev. Patrick Murdoch, prefixed to his "Poetical Works." London. 1849.

<sup>2</sup> Genest, iv. 612.

<sup>3</sup> Again on account of satire upon political venality. Kirkman's "Life of Macklin," ii. 277.

and Theodore  
Hook.

excision of a hit at open-air preachers from Theodore Hook's farce, "Killing no Murder." Hook replaced it by the following hit at the Censor himself:—*Apollo Belvi*. "At last we got into a sad scrape, for, having advertised the farce of 'The Devil to Pay,' old Justice Carpat, who between you and I was a bit of a shoemaker—hearing as how it contained some personal reflections on the cobbling profession—stopped the performance and threatened to send us all to the stocks." The interference of the Censor stimulated public interest in the farce, and the audience night after night applied and applauded this not very brilliant lampoon, "to show their detestation," says Hook, "of his arbitrary and strained prerogative." Even the mild Genest is moved to add that "if every person who may be aggrieved by the Licenser would, like Hook, bring the circumstances of the case before the public, it might possibly bring that petty tyrant to reason."<sup>1</sup> Nor did Mr. Larpent allow the sanctity of private life to be invaded, for we find it recorded that he objected to the word "gammon" in a farce by T. Morton, because he had a friend in Hamp-

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<sup>1</sup> Genest, viii. 145. Cumberland's "British Theatre," vol. xxxi.

shire of that name, whose feelings might be hurt if it were taken in vain on the stage.

George Colman the younger was a model *George Colman jun.*  
Censor, and we have, fortunately, an instructive record of his proceedings in his own evidence, and that of his contemporaries, before the Parliamentary Committee of 1832. He was probably appointed on the principle of "set a thief to catch a thief," the validity of which he amply proved. The expression "damme" was carefully erased, as "immoral and improper," from every play which came before him. On its being pointed out to him that the same expression occurred in many of his own works, he explained that when he wrote them "he was a careless and immoral author," adding, "I did my business as an author at that time, and I do my business as an examiner now." "Hang me," on the other hand, he considered quite as expressive and entirely proper. The phrase, "He had no more idea of it than Eve had of pin-money," occurring in his own "John Bull," he admitted to be one which he would have struck out in another man's work. He even boasted of having "erased an angel or two," holding angels to be "celestial bodies," by no means fitted for the air of a playhouse. Among the lines thus suppressed was the famous testi-

*Parliamentary Papers, 1832, vol. vii.*

*"Black-Eyed  
Susan."*

mony to William's character in Douglas Jerrold's "Black-Eyed Susan": "He plays the fiddle like a hangel." This speech has since been restored without any strikingly deleterious effect upon the thousand audiences who have applauded it. Nor did he neglect public decency in his care for public piety. He cut out the word "thighs" from a farce named "The Bashful Man," which, indeed, he would have been justified in entirely suppressing, as its title must surely have been a personal allusion to himself.

*Miss Mitford's  
"Charles I."*

During the madness of George III. the performance of "King Lear" had been officially forbidden. This was before Colman came to office; but he, too, kept a strict eye upon politics. In a play, by Douglas Jerrold, called "The Bride of Ludgate," Charles II. was to appear disguised as a priest and perform a mock marriage; but by the Censor's orders, "owing to the present situation of the bishops," the priest was changed into a proctor. A more vigorous act of authority, however, was the total suppression, in 1825, of Miss Mitford's "Charles I." on the ground that it "took liberties" with the character, at a time when, as Mr. Collier suggests, "there was a disposition to think lightly of the authority of kings." The tragedy was produced nine years later, at a theatre beyond

the Lord Chamberlain's jurisdiction, and does not seem to have brought about a revolution.

Strangely enough, scarcely an allusion was made before the Committee of 1832 to a work which throws a vivid light upon the methods and principles of official censorship. In the year 1824, when the delights of irresponsible power were yet new to Mr. Colman, a tragedy named "Alasco," by Mr. (afterwards Sir) Martin Archer Shee, was submitted to him. Dealing with a Polish subject, it was full of common-places about liberty and tyranny, through every one of which the Censor drew his pen "in a rage of red ink." Though the play was already in rehearsal, Mr. Shee refused to let it appear in its mutilated condition, preferring to print it with the excised passages in italics, and with sarcastic foot-notes appended. The sarcasms were quite unnecessary. No comment could make the publication more damaging than it was in itself. A more turgidly moral and rhetorically respectable work it would be hard to conceive. Its most inflammatory portions are mere vague generalities of Whig patriotism. Among the phrases erased by Mr. Colman are the following :

*Sir M. A. Shee's  
"Alasco."*

*An author's  
revenge.*

"No, no, whate'er the colour of his creed  
The man of honour's orthodox."

"Our common wrongs—our country's wrongs, unite us."

"Some sland'rous tool of State,  
Some taunting, dull, unmannered deputy."

"But shall I reverence pride, and lust, and rapine?  
No!"

"Am I so lightly held—so low in estimate,  
To brook dishonour from a knave in place?"

*The Lord  
Chamberlain  
on his defence.*

The tone of the author's comments on this line may be imagined. Another curiosity of this most curious document in the history of the censorship is the reply of the Lord Chamberlain to a remonstrance addressed to him by Mr. Shee. In a letter, whose composition shows that a knowledge of the English language is not a necessary qualification for autocratic power over the English drama, the Duke of Montrose writes: "Whilst I am persuaded that your intentions are upright, I conceive that it is precisely for this reason—though it may not strike authors—that it has been the wisdom of the Legislature to have an Examiner appointed, and power given to the Chamberlain of the Household to judge whether certain plays should be acted at all, or not acted at particular times." This defence of the censorship from its own august mouth is extremely valuable and instructive.

The main object of the Committee of 1832 (Mr. E. L. Bulwer, afterwards Lord Lytton, being one of its most active members) was to consider the licensing, not of plays, but of theatres. It resulted, several years later, in the abolition of the privileges of the patent theatres, and the establishment of practical free trade in theatrical speculation. By the Act of 1843 (6 & 7 Victoria, cap. 68), which is still in force, the power of granting licenses to all theatres in London and Westminster, Finsbury, Marylebone, Tower Hamlets, Lambeth, and Southwark, is conferred on the Lord Chamberlain, while beyond these boundaries it vests in the Justices of the Peace. With the merits of this system I have here nothing to do. It must be pointed out, however, that in these provisions the Censor finds his sole weapon of offence. But for them, his prohibitions might be disregarded with impunity. The department has neither machinery nor funds for the prosecution of offenders and exaction of the statutory penalty. But, as the power of granting and withdrawing licenses rests absolutely with the Lord Chamberlain, or with magistrates who are extremely unlikely to countenance any opposition to his authority, his secret tribunal, when it so wills, "can

*Committee of*  
1832.

*Bulwer's Act,*  
1843.

*The Censor's*  
*weapon.*



strike, and firmly, and one stroke." The Lord Chamberlain has, indeed, the power to order the closing of any theatre on any day or days he pleases. Not until last year did he withdraw his prohibition of performances on Ash Wednesday, an anachronism which caused a cruel yearly loss to the minor employees of the metropolitan theatres; and up to 1832, if not later, the theatres were closed every Wednesday and Friday during Lent, and on the anniversary of the "martyrdom" of King Charles I.!

As regards the censorship proper, this Act practically re-enacts the provisions of Walpole's Act of 1737. The function of the office is stated to be "the preservation of good manners, decorum, and of the public peace," and plays are required to be sent in seven days before production, instead of fourteen days, as under the former Act.

*Committee of*  
1853.

In 1853<sup>1</sup> a Select Committee upon Public

<sup>1</sup> At this date, according to Mr. Norman Macdonald, Superintendent of the Lord Chamberlain's Department, fees were paid, not for reading, but for licensing. They were £1 for anything under three acts, £2 for three or more acts. George Colman in 1832 distinctly stated that in his time the principle was no license, no fee. (See *ante*, p. 105). Since 1853 this has been altered, and the fee, in terms of the Act of 1843, made payable on delivery of the MS.



Houses devoted passing attention to the question of the censorship, and reported that it did not seem to have been vexatiously exercised. In 1850 the number of plays submitted was 230, and none were rejected; 228 were submitted in 1851, and five rejected; 225 in 1852, out of which three were rejected. Among the victims were "La Tour de Nesle" and "La Dame aux Camélias" (both in French), which "it was not thought very desirable to produce here." Thus two world-famous works, one at least of which has since been licensed both in French and English, were suppressed because an official at St. James's considered them "not very desirable."<sup>1</sup>

The most important document in the recent history of the censorship is the report of the Select Committee of 1866. This, too, is largely occupied with questions of theatre-licensing, and of the respective rights and duties of theatres and music-halls; but the censorship also receives a full measure of attention.

The first witness examined was the Hon.

*Committee of  
1866.*

*Parliamentary  
Papers, 1866,  
vol. xvi.*

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<sup>1</sup> In the course of his evidence Mr. Macdonald stated that it was theoretically the duty of the Censor to attend rehearsals, and he seems actually to have done so in some cases.

*Hon. S. B.  
Ponsonby.*

Spencer Brabazon Ponsonby, Comptroller of the Lord Chamberlain's Department. This gentleman was of opinion that the modern French drama is almost entirely immoral; that, but for the censorship, ours would be the same; that a large number of plays are suppressed by the indirect influence of the censorship; that authors most willingly consent to alterations; and that "*La Traviata*," which had been licensed in Italian but not in English, should by rights have been altogether suppressed. Questioned as to whether his license was withdrawn from a manager sending in an immoral play, he replied, "No; that play is merely banished, and there is an end of it"—an admirably concise statement of the working of the censorship.

*Mr. W. B.  
Donne.*

Mr. W. Bodham Donne, then Examiner of Plays, was the next witness of importance, and revealed some of the secrets of his craft in a manner which testified at once his conscientiousness and his naïveté. Early in his expurgatory career he was impressed with the futility of straining at words and letting actions pass unnoticed. In pantomime especially he was aware that there was a great deal of "business," not even suggested in the text, into which the most dangerous political, moral

or religious meanings could be introduced. The clown was notoriously a person of lax morals, on which the cautious conservatism of the pantaloons could place little or no restraint. Under the harlequin's mask, itself a suspicious object, the most incendiary principles might be concealed; while the policeman, the only representative of law and order, was too often treated with disrespect, not to say contumely, and held up to public ridicule and contempt. Mr. Donne accordingly decreed that all pantomimic "business" should be written down and submitted to him along with the words to be spoken. Everything was to be put in black and white—"when harlequin dances with columbine, when he makes a change," &c.<sup>1</sup> His demand was entirely logical and in perfect harmony with the spirit of his office; but the full grandeur of his devotion to duty can be appreciated only when we know that every December he had four or five plays and nearly thirty pantomimes and burlesques to examine, most of them in the three or four days before Boxing Night. What more than Herculean toil! To read the books of two dozen pantomimes must of itself tax the most powerful



*His dealings  
with panto-  
mime.*

<sup>1</sup> See "Parliamentary Reports," 1866, vol. xvi. p. 78, Questions 2124-2127.

intellect, but to examine their comic business and purify it of all profanity, impropriety, and sedition would demand a whole college of inquisitors. Yet we find this devoted functionary, instead of claiming any special recognition of his services, modestly regretting that he cannot be in several places at once to see that his directions are carried out. When informed of any disobedience, however, he has still energy left to "execute justice at once;" that is, he "tells the manager that he must either withdraw the play or mind what is said to him." Nor must it be supposed that his surveillance is nominal or even lax. "He draws his pen through anything in the shape of an oath, anything which turns religion into ridicule, and any political joke." So exact, on one occasion at least, was his attention to the first of these duties, that in one of Mr. Gilbert's plays the expression "chambers fit for a Lord" was altered by the censorial blue-pencil into "chambers fit for a Heaven." As to "political jokes" he was not so punctilious. In the season 1871-72, as we find from a correspondence in the *Daily News*, he gave managers to understand that "he had struck Lowe's name and the matches out of every pantomime;" yet Mr. Millward, the author of

For "Lord"  
read  
"Heaven."

"Political  
jokes."

several of that season's pantomimes, writes to say that all his jokes on the forbidden topic had been left untouched. On the other hand, the line "May Gladstone keep his temper" was ruthlessly expunged from a topical song. About the same time he stopped a farce at the Strand Theatre on the ground that "insanity was a much too painful affliction to be treated humorously," and three months later sanctioned another farce bearing the title "He's a Lunatic." Had Mr. Donne been Censor in Shakespeare's time, would he or would he not have expunged from "Twelfth Night" the scenes of Malvolio's madness?

In order fully to illustrate Mr. Donne's censorial activity, I have wandered away from the Report of 1866. Let us now return to it, and note one or two more points in the same gentleman's evidence. Having stated that "Oliver Twist" and "Jack Sheppard" had been suppressed after production,<sup>1</sup> on account of their tendency to incite to crime, he admitted

*"Oliver  
Twist" and  
"Jack Shep-  
pard."*

<sup>1</sup> The only plays so treated during his recollection, said Mr. Donne. Mr. J. Stirling Coyne, however, stated before the same Committee that a play of his named "Lola Montes" was stopped after it had run two nights, but was allowed to be reproduced four nights afterwards, without a single change except the substitution of "Pas de Fascination" for its original title.

that the latter was sometimes allowed to be acted for benefits, but did not explain why benefit audiences should be incited to crime while the morals of the general public were so carefully protected. "Oliver Twist," it may be remarked, has had at least one considerable run under the sanction of Mr. Donne's successor without seriously swelling the Newgate Calendar. The most remarkable of Mr. Donne's utterances I have kept till the last—namely, his opinion that "*double entendre* is a species of wit which is very nearly extinct!" It has always seemed to me that the censorial mind must be subject to fits of abnormal obtuseness to this "species of wit," but it is somewhat startling to find its divine innocence thus formulated in so many words.

"Double  
entendre"  
extinct!

Messrs.  
Webster and  
Buckstone.

Messrs. Benjamin Webster and J. B. Buckstone followed Mr. Donne on the roll of witnesses. Both declared themselves perfectly satisfied with the working of the censorship; but the weight of this testimony may be estimated from the fact that both lamented bitterly the abolition of the privileges of the patent theatres, attributing to it the "decline" of the British drama. The fact that Mr. Buckstone, both as playwright and as actor, found himself entirely unhampered by the censorship, is of

itself a cutting comment upon its utility, and upon Mr. Donne's theory of the obsolescence of *double entendre*. The only instance of official interference mentioned by Mr. Buckstone occurred in 1846, when the House of Commons was to have been put upon the Haymarket stage, Mr. Buckstone himself playing Lord John Russell. The drama was, of course, promptly suppressed. The elder Mathews, however, was allowed to impersonate Daniel O'Connell on the stage, "because it was so very funny," Mr. Buckstone suggests, but more probably because O'Connell's influence in the Lord Chamberlain's office was naturally small.

Mr. E. T. Smith, a prolific playwright and experienced manager, was among the next witnesses. He had not found the censorship work inconveniently. His plays were sent in with the fee, read, and returned immediately; "and if there is anything put in by the author about our Saviour or God it is cut out." As an instance of justifiable interference, he mentioned the suppression of a drama at the Surrey in which the case of Thurtell and Weir was dealt with, the famous gig being drawn nightly across the stage. This play, Mr. Moy Thomas states, was produced before the trial, when such flagrant contempt of court could

Mr. E. T.  
Smith.



surely have been stopped without the Lord Chamberlain's intervention; after the trial, the taste of the exhibition would no doubt have been execrable, but scores of similar dramas have been licensed before and since.

*Messrs. Boucicault, Reade, Hollingshead and Taylor.*

Among the remaining witnesses were Mr. Dion Boucicault, Mr. Charles Reade, Mr. John Hollingshead, and Mr. Tom Taylor. The first two expressed no objection to the existence of a censorship, if only it were accompanied with a right of appeal, probably to the Home Secretary. Mr. Hollingshead and Mr. Tom Taylor, on the other hand, maintained in unqualified terms the futility of the office. Mr. Boucicault, whose experience is certainly wide enough to entitle his opinion to respect, expressed his conviction that the English public, like that of the United States, is perfectly fitted to be its own Censor. In America, he said, the police regulations for safety and decency are found amply sufficient, and the moral tone of the stage is on the whole higher than here.

*Mr. Shirley Brooks.*

One of the most interesting pieces of evidence given before the Committee was Mr. Shirley Brooks' description of his encounter with the censorship, on the subject of an adaptation of "Coningsby." He had under-

taken it in 1844 at the request of the Keeleys, then managers of the Lyceum. The piece was rehearsed, an elaborate scene representing the Eton Montem was prepared, and everything was in order, when, to the astonishment of all concerned, an intimation arrived that it would not be licensed. Mr. Brooks at once went to St. James's, and was received with great courtesy by the Lord Chamberlain in person. They went over the play together, and point after point, which to the author appeared perfectly harmless, was declared inadmissible. The main objection to the whole play was its "quasi-political" character. It "exhibited a sort of contrast" between the higher and the lower classes. In vain Mr. Brooks pointed out that in almost every piece at the transpontine theatres, some titled villain with a star and garter, or at the very least a wicked baronet, was maltreating his poor tenants or corrupting their female relatives, amid the execrations of the pit and gallery. In vain he argued that in his "Coningsby" the aristocracy were exhibited in a much more favourable light. Everything suggestive of class antagonism was sternly deleted. "Then this was not to be in and that was not to be in; something might be construed as an

*A "quasi-political" play.*

"*Highgate's  
Ointment.*"

allusion to some family in Shropshire; Mr. Holloway's ointment was not to be put in as Mr. Highgate's ointment, because really Mr. Holloway was an industrious tradesman and employed a good many people, and so on." "Of course," Mr. Brooks says mildly, "a series of things of that kind places a dramatic author in a very unfavourable position." He adds, however, that he never had any further difficulty with the Lord Chamberlain, because "he soon learnt his lesson and made his satire out of milder materials."

Since 1870—  
"Lowe and  
the matches."

We come now to our own times, and to events which are within the memory of every one. The suppression of allusions to Mr. Lowe and the match-tax in the pantomimes of 1871, led to a correspondence in the *Daily News*, which culminated in the publication of a long and able article on the subject by Mr. Moy Thomas (January 9, 1872). The case could not have been more concisely and convincingly stated, but no effect was produced, though rumours were for a time current that a curtailment of the powers of the censorship was contemplated in high places.

"*The Happy  
Land.*"

In 1873 Messrs. W. S. Gilbert and Gilbert A'Beckett produced at the Court Theatre a burlesque of Mr. Gilbert's "*Wicked World*,"

entitled "The Happy Land." In it three of the leading characters were "made up" in imitation of Messrs. Gladstone, Lowe, and Ayrton, while the dialogue contained some really clever political persiflage. The Censor saw that he had been trifled with. It was too late to suppress the dialogue, but he promptly insisted upon the alteration of the actors' make-up, and his fiat had to be obeyed. It is not stated that the political prejudices of the audience were so aroused as to endanger the public peace, which would surely be the only rational excuse for such an act of authority. Moreover, the objectionable masks were retained when the burlesque went the round of the provinces, where political feeling certainly runs quite as high as in London.<sup>1</sup>

It would be tedious to follow the censorship through all the inconsistencies into which the French drama, that troublesome factor in modern civilization, has entrapped it. The visits of French companies to London, so

*French plays  
and adapta-  
tions.*

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<sup>1</sup> In a pantomime produced two or three years ago in Edinburgh, an actor made up in imitation of Mr. Gladstone, and sent the Premier a photograph of himself in the part. So far from calling on the Lord Chamberlain to repress such insolence, Mr. Gladstone acknowledged the photograph with the remark that it seemed an excellent likeness.

common of late years, must have been the bane of the Censor's existence. Several comparatively innocent plays have been placed in his Index Expurgatorius, while many others of more than questionable tendency have been licensed. The Censor may, of course, deny this assertion, pleading that one man's meat is another man's poison, and that he can decide upon a play's morality or immorality only by its effect upon himself. This is quite true. I am far from wondering at or blaming his inconsistency. A consistent Censor is almost a contradiction in terms. The mistake is simply this: one man's meat being another man's poison, one man, provided with no heaven-sent test, is set to determine authoritatively what shall be meat and what poison for all other men. To say that he errs, frequently and ludicrously, is merely to say that he is mortal; and if he has erred ludicrously in the past, may he not err destructively in the future?

*"A Novel Reader" (La Petite Marquise).*

In the year 1878, Messrs. Sydney Grundy and Joseph Mackay made an adaptation of "La Petite Marquise" of MM. Meilhac and Halévy, under the title of "A Novel Reader." It was refused a license. The authors wrote to the Censor requesting to know what

passages had given offence, and were informed that that functionary could hold no communication with dramatists except through a manager. The manager of the theatre where the play was to have been produced accordingly called at St. James's. He was courteously received, and the offensive passages were pointed out to him, but *under the seal of the strictest confidence*. A correspondence ensued in the newspapers, in which Mr. Grundy hurled invectives, more just than judicious, at the censorship. His point, however, was generally mistaken. He did not complain of the rejection of "A Novel Reader," but of the secrecy of a tribunal by which, in the words of Mr. Brabazon Ponsonby, a play was "merely banished and there was an end of it." The case was, indeed, a strange one. The Censor is certainly not bound by the constitution of his office to give reasons for his decision, but there is nothing either in the theory of his position or in the practice of his predecessors to prevent his doing so. As it was, the authors working in the dark, attempted to modify whatever features in their work might be thought questionable. This, as it turned out, was to be regretted, for their chance of "placing" it was past, and when at last it was played at a private

— banished,  
and there was  
an end of it!

performance, for which no license was required, its original form could not be restored, so that the merits of the Censor's decision remained untested. I do not think that, even in this case, the British drama was robbed of a masterpiece. Immoral the play cannot have been. On the contrary, its satire was levelled at the evils of the febrile school of feminine fiction, a subject which cries out for serious treatment. Unfortunately the authors of "A Novel Reader" did not treat it seriously. They attempted to graft a sober moral upon a piece of French flippancy, and the result was not happy. Serious errors must be seriously satirized. We look for flippancy in Horace, but not in Juvenal; and the vulgar immorality of a certain school of fiction is a subject for Juvenal rather than Horace. "A Novel Reader," therefore, can scarcely have been a work of good art, though its earlier form was probably much better than its later. The Censor's æsthetic sensibilities may have been justly offended; but then his business is not with taste, but with morals.

"A False Step"  
(*Les Lionnes  
Pauvres*).

A similar case, though of yet more flagrant injustice, was the suppression of the late Mr. Arthur Matthison's drama, "A False Step." This was a translation of Augier's tragedy,



“Les Lionnes Pauvres.” A tragedy it indeed deserves to be called, for it “arouses and refines both pity and terror,” and that by the simplest and noblest methods. “Le vice individuel,” says Augier in his preface, “n’est pas à supprimer, mais on peut en supprimer la contagion;” and a more potent antiseptic than this play it would be hard to conceive. Even the Censor could not but see that it was “profoundly moral in its ultimate purpose,” but, conceiving that “if presented to a mixed English audience it would give much offence,” he absolutely vetoed it. Truly he was wiser when, in dealing with “A Novel Reader,” he refused to give his reasons, for the worst enemy of his office could not have satirized it more bitterly. As the Censor’s duty in 1737 was to shield venality in St. Stephen’s, so it seems to have been his function in 1878 to shield immorality in Mayfair. Let us be just, however, and admit that his position was not quite so absurd as might be supposed from the above unfortunate phrase. He meant that if the piece were placed on the stage, the public and the critics would protest against it as painful and un-English; and here, I think, he was right. An eloquent letter by Mr. Clement Scott, prefixed to the published edition of the

*The Censor  
gives his  
reasons*

*for suppressing  
a "profoundly  
moral" play.*

play, shows that one critic at least would not have joined in this cry; but there is little doubt that the cry would have been raised. I do not for a moment believe that Mr. Matthison's not very skilful translation would have succeeded. Its tone is far too serious and its matter far too "unpleasant" for the British public. The change of the scene from Paris to London, too, is unfortunate, for the picture of manners is in its details decidedly French, and would thus have given colour to an accusation of untruth. The play, in short, was far too good to succeed; but was it the Censor's duty to deprive it of its chance? He acted for the nonce on a new theory of his functions, and held himself bound to save a manager from making a bad investment. It might have been hissed on the first night and taken off after a week; but even then a certain section of the public would have made acquaintance, in the theatre or through the papers, with a masterpiece of French literature, whose "ultimate purpose," on the Censor's own showing, is "profoundly moral." Only on the theory that hissing a play is a breach of the "public peace," to be prevented at all hazards, can his action in this case be for a moment defended.

The Censor has shown for nameless French

farce-writers a tolerance he has not extended to Augier and Halévy. I need only mention "The Three Hats," produced with success at the Royalty, "Hush! not a Word," a failure at the Avenue, and "The Man with Three Wives," a recent success at the Criterion, as instances of the buffoonery which is held at St. James's to come "within" the limits of becoming mirth." I cannot refrain from quoting one charming little domestic scene from the last-mentioned play, an apt commentary upon Mr. Boucicault's theory that the influence of the censorship is like that of a lady at a dinner-party, "controlling in a delicate way the subjects spoken of." The personages are a father, mother, and daughter; the time, the daughter's marriage day. *Mother (in tears)*—"My poor child! My poor child!" *Father*—"Come, I suppose she's my poor child too." *Mother (pensively)*—"I suppose so." [Great laughter.] . . . *Mother*—"My child, a husband is not a mother." *Father*—"No, nor a father—at least, not always." [Shrieks of laughter.] . . . *Mother*—"Be kind to your husband, my dear, and take care of his children." *Daughter*—"Has Jack got any children?" [Here the father throws himself upon the sofa in uncontrollable paroxysms of mirth, in which the

*French farces  
licensed.*

*"Good  
manners and  
decorum" at  
the Criterion.*

audience joins for the space of a minute or so.] There can surely be no doubt that such a passage is grossly stupid; and, but that the Censor in the exercise of the infallibility conferred upon him by Act of Parliament (10 Geo. II. c. 19) has avouched it to be consistent with "good manners and decorum," I should be inclined to call it stupidly gross. If this be refined humour, at all events, it would be curious to know what the Censor regards as coarse.

*Defilement not  
all from with-  
out.*

Though the plays I have just mentioned are adaptations from the French, it must not be supposed that they have brought all their objectionable qualities with them across the Channel. The plot of "A Man with Three Wives," for example, is comparatively harmless, and might have been treated without the least indelicacy. Some ingenuous persons have an idea that the work of an English adaptor is one of expurgation. This may have been the case twenty years ago, but now we have changed all that. Under the fostering care of an irresponsible censorship, a school of adaptors has grown up which understands its functions quite differently. It may expurgate plots, if it be expurgation to call a "cocotte" an "actress," and to describe as "flirtation"

an offence alluded to in the Decalogue and the Divorce Court under a harsher name. This is like cleaning a dirty face by daubing it with powder; but the Censor's simple soul is satisfied, and what more can we require? As regards dialogue, on the other hand, the work of this school of adaptors is the opposite of expurgatory. As most of the French filth of the original would be incomprehensible to the average British audience, it is their business to invent English ribaldry pungent enough to maintain the requisite aroma of nastiness. In this art they have acquired no little skill, though their task is lightened by the fact that the British public, unlike the French, does not demand humour along with its grossness. Latterly, too, we have developed a group of playwrights who scorn to go to France for their intrigues, holding that home-made fabrics take on the aforesaid aroma just as readily as those of foreign manufacture. They are perfectly right, and we may point with just pride to the immodesty-market as one in which (under the system of censorial protection) we are beginning to hold our own against all the world.

*Home-made  
indecentcy.*

A husband, two months after marriage, is led to suspect his wife, a mere girl, of being the

*"Confusion."*

mother of a baby which (by a grotesquely impossible device) is introduced into his house. He seems also to believe, though this is not stated in so many words, that her uncle is her seducer; and he imagines that the two have plotted to get the child out of the way by drowning it. This is the merry little misunderstanding set forth, with the approbation of the Censor, in Mr. Joseph Derrick's "eccentric comedy" of "Confusion." A similar circumstance forms the ground-work of Mr. T. G. Warren's "Nita's First," only that in this case the paternity of the infant is attributed to almost all the characters in turn, among the rest to a schoolboy in Eton jackets. Such is the charming vein of native humour which an irresponsible censorship encourages our playwrights to work! The title of Mr. Derrick's second production, "Twins," promised a similar elegant extract from the poetry of childhood, but did not fulfil the promise. The "Twins" were a Bishop and a Waiter, and though a good deal of "aroma" was infused into the dialogue and stage business, the plot was not essentially objectionable. But here the Censor was up in arms. A Bishop twin brother to a Waiter! Flat burglary as ever was committed! The solemn

"Nita's First."

"Twins."

ties of fatherhood and motherhood may be made a mockery, the sanctity of childhood may be profaned, but the gaiters of a Colonial Bishop are holy things; from these let the playwright hold aloof. At a theatre not a hundred yards distant, indeed, a curate is being held up nightly to ridicule and contempt in "The Private Secretary," but a curate is only a curate, and a Colonial Bishop is a Colonial Bishop. Promptly and firmly the Censor intervenes, spreading his ægis over the Apron. "May we make the Bishop a Professor, then?" inquires the playwright. "By all means," is the bland reply. "Insult Science as much as you please, but do not ridicule the Church." And now let me beg the reader to observe what a marvellously efficient institution is this irresponsible censorship of ours. The fiat has gone forth, and the Bishop has become a Professor on the playbills; but when the curtain rises, lo! he is a Bishop still. The Censor can alter the word "Bishop" into "Professor" in the manuscript, but he cannot, or at any rate he does not, prevent the Professor from dressing as Bishop, from the crown of his shovel hat to the calves of his gaitered legs! The audience knows perfectly well that he is intended for a Bishop, accepts

*The Church in danger.*

*Bishop or Professor?*



him as one, and (such is their irreverence) laughs at him accordingly. If the Church is endangered by the holding up of a Colonial Bishop to ridicule and contempt, then the Censor, with all his autocratic power, has failed to protect it. Night after night the farce within a farce is enacted, while the Censor stands motionless by, a spectacle for gods and men. As a matter of fact, religion does not suffer one whit by this tragi-comic display of impotence on the part of its official defender. It is not the Church, but the censorship, which is held up to ridicule and contempt.

*Events of 1886.*

I have now sketched the history of the office down to the present year—a year which has already been fruitful of troubles for the eminently well-meaning functionary now in power. Difficulties have multiplied on every hand. His path has been so closely beset by mantraps and spring-guns that he must have acquired a vivid sympathy with his brother Autocrat, the Czar of all the Russias. These two Great Irresponsibles, one of the East, the other of the West, are perhaps the mortals in all Europe most to be pitied. They are like men slipping down a glacier with crevasses on all sides, and expecting every moment to find themselves engulfed in some sudden abyss.

*The Great  
Irresponsibles.*

Both in French and in English have snares been spread for the Censor. Mdlle. Magnier, a French actress playing at the Royalty, was moved to announce "La Petite Marquise" for performance. A moralized English version of "La Petite Marquise" having, as we have seen, been vetoed by the Censor, it was clearly impossible to license the unregenerate original. The performance was accordingly forbidden; whereupon what must Mdlle. Magnier do but announce in its place Sardou's "Divorçons!" a play already licensed three or four years ago. The irony of circumstances could go no further. It so happens that "Divorçons!" is simply a re-handling of the theme of "La Petite Marquise," infinitely more highly spiced. One devil being cast out, seven other devils, with their passport duly signed by the Censor himself, instantly took possession of the Royalty. "Divorçons!" is one of the wittiest, but at the same time one of the most unblushingly indecent of French light-comedies. Compared with it, "La Petite Marquise" is family reading.<sup>1</sup>

*"La Petite  
Marquise" and  
"Divorçons!"*

*The frying-pan  
and the fire.*

<sup>1</sup> If any one questions this statement, I can only refer him to the two books, which are easily accessible. I would especially call his attention to the passages in "Divorçons!" (ed. 1883), of which I quote the opening and closing phrases: P. 50, "Je vous voyais jeune, beau, svelte, élégant . . . mes chairs palpitantes." P. 86, "E.

There are speeches and scenes in it so suggestive that I doubt whether anything more scabrous has ever been said or done on the public stage in any civilized country. If Mr. Charles Wyndham wishes to do a great service to the English drama, he will engage a competent playwright to make a faithful and spirited translation (not an adaptation) of "*Divorçons!*" and will put it on at the Criterion. I am not sure whether it would be technically necessary to submit the play for license, seeing it has

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d'inspiration, je détache une épingle, et je me pique au-dessus de la jarrettière . . . Franchement, tu ne peux pas appeler ça une infidélité"—in this passage the delicate "*Que toi!*" of *Cyprienne* is especially to be noted. P. 97, "*Imposez silence à votre cœur . . . Ne tuez pas le dîner par le lunch.*" P. 166, "*Qu'est ce qui te fait rire? . . . Ça le serait encore.*" The whole of the last act, indeed, is as shameless as anything well can be. A man plying a woman with wine and aphrodisiacs until she proposes to him in so many words to "*tromper*" another man whom she conceives to have a right to her fidelity—if anything much grosser than this was ever put on the stage, I have neither seen, read, nor heard of it. The fact that the "*one man*" is her husband, and the "*other man*" her lover, does not seem to me by any means to purify the situation. I saw it stated in a newspaper that the piece suffered from the excisions insisted on by the Censor. If he did insist on any excisions it is merely another proof of the futility of his office, for I can vouch for it that the actors conscientiously spoke the whole text, and went through all the "*business.*"

already been licensed in French ; but if it were submitted, in what an exquisite dilemma would the Censor be placed ! He could scarcely veto a piece which has already been played with his sanction by three different companies, and to which the Prince of Wales, trusting, we may suppose, to the official warranty of its innocence, has publicly conducted the young Prince George, with a view, no doubt, to perfecting his pronunciation of the French language. On the other hand, if he licensed it, I venture to predict that even a Criterion audience would rise up and hiss it off the stage—an event which would be little short of a death-blow to the censorship.

*A dilemma for  
the Censor.*

Even more perilous than the French snare is the English pitfall into which the Censor has recently stumbled. On January 2, 1886, a play named "Nadjezda," by Mr. Maurice Barrymore, was produced at the Haymarket Theatre. Its plot was as repulsive as it well could be, and some of its dialogue was gratuitously gross. In the prologue a woman sold her honour to a cynical seducer, and came on the stage to make public confession immediately after the fulfilment of the unholy compact. The substance of the remaining acts consisted of an elaborate and undisguised attempt on the part of the same

*"Nadjezda :"*

*Its plot,*

*and its  
dialogue.*

*"The Cenci."*

cynical seducer to gain dishonourable possession of the daughter of the woman he had betrayed in the prologue. If any play of the Elizabethan or any other era deals with matters much more repellent than these, I have yet to become acquainted with it. As for the dialogue, I need only give one specimen. A young lady, immediately on her introduction to a young gentleman, looks him straight in the face and inquires, "Are your intentions honourable or dishonourable?" upon which he answers, "Am I to understand, madam, that I am allowed the choice?" Scarcely had this play been licensed and produced when a malignant spirit prompted some one to suggest the formation of a Shelley Society, and then induced the Shelley Society to organize a performance of "The Cenci." At once the Censor intimated that such an enormity could not be endured. Now, I shall not attempt to determine with precision the extent of sexual misdoing admissible or inadmissible on the stage. The infallibility conferred by Act of Parliament (10 George II. c. 19) upon the Censor has doubtless enabled him to draw the line to a hair's breadth; but to my fallible judgment it seems a strange discrimination which leaves "Nadjezda" on the right side of the line and "The Cenci" on the wrong. So far

as mere plot is concerned, both are in the region of horrors, and I fail to see that the one is in reality a whit more horrible than the other. But even supposing the matter of "The Cenci" to be ten times as ghastly as that of "Nadjezda," the treatment, it must surely be conceded, should suffice to reverse the balance. Shelley raised his historic theme into the highest sphere of art; Mr. Barrymore treated his modern and imaginary subject crudely and repulsively. If style is anything—and some will tell us that style is everything—"The Cenci" has every redeeming grace, "Nadjezda" not one. The difference in the periods of the two plays is not unimportant. Horrors in Renaissance costume do not shock us so much as brutalities in modern dress. If an Oxford or Cambridge company were to give a performance of the "Ædipus Tyrannus," the Censor would cover himself with ridicule did he think of interfering; but a modernized version of the same story might justly be considered somewhat startling. On all these grounds, then, I maintain that to have vetoed "Nadjezda" would have been rational and defensible, so far as these terms can be applied to any action of so irrational and indefensible an office; while to veto "The Cenci" is to degrade English

*Straining at  
Shelley,  
swallowing  
Barrymore.*



literature and insult the English public. I do not say and I do not think that "The Cenci" deserves to be, or is ever likely to become, a popular stage play; but I do say and I do think that the English nation should be allowed to judge for itself as to whether the works of its great poets are fit or unfit for the stage, without asking leave or license of any irresponsible official whatsoever.

*Futility of the veto.*

And now mark the futility of the whole affair. A public performance of "The Cenci" would endanger "good manners, decorum, or the public peace," these being the things over which the Censor is deputed, by Act of Parliament, to keep watch; but the Shelley Society can give a private representation whenever it pleases. A private representation is one to which the audience is admitted without payment; in other words, the expenses must be defrayed, not by the sale of tickets, but by subscriptions to the Shelley Society, which then issues invitations to the performance. The practical result, as every one knows, is precisely the same. The same actors play, the same audience assembles, the same critics discuss the performance in the same newspapers. The only difference is that, the Censor's action having advertised the matter, there may probably be a more eager demand

*Public and private performance identical in result.*



for "invitations." People who care nothing for Shelley or for literature may seek to be present, and failing that, may study the accounts of the performance, in the hope of finding a certain prurient or scandalous gratification—a hope, I need scarcely add, which will be grievously disappointed. "The Cenci," in short, whether publicly or privately performed, will attract none but a dilettante audience. Supposing, however, that a public representation were to allure the many who would be excluded from a private performance, I see no reason why dilettanti should be privileged to dabble in indecorum (if there were any in the matter) which would be noxious to the great public. "Such is the law!" the Censor may say; to which I reply that such ought not to be the law, and that this affair of "The Cenci" will one day prove to be a large nail in the coffin of the censorship.

The tale I have just told carries its own moral. It may be summed up as follows:—The censorship was established as an offshoot of the royal prerogative, when it was, so to speak, at its roylest. It was confirmed under the would-be paternal rule of the Stuarts, whose theory of government necessarily fostered every

*Summing up :  
The censorship  
first a prerogative of absolutism,*

*then a shield  
for venality.*

*King Stork  
and King Log.*

form of irresponsible meddling. At the end of the seventeenth century and beginning of the eighteenth it had fallen almost into abeyance.<sup>1</sup> Then came a period when a great Minister—great with all his faults—ruled the country by means of an unrepresentative and venal House of Commons. The stage ventured to give humorous expression to the people's growing contempt for their legislators, and at the lightest touch of satire the galled jades winced. Such insolence was clearly intolerable. An old weapon was rummaged out of the lumber-room of royal prerogative, provided with a statutory handle, and delivered to a Court official, who was to stand sentinel at the gates of Stageland and give no quarter to any one who should venture an excursion into the sacred domain of politics. Let it be thoroughly understood by those who believe in the censorship as a bulwark of public morality, that it was established in its present form as a shield for political immorality. Combining the qualities of King Stork and King Log, it has been alternately tyrannical and futile, odious and ridiculous. By its own confession it is inconsistent, and

<sup>1</sup> Lord Chesterfield refers to the time of Charles II., "when the stage was under a license," as to a bygone state of affairs.

has admitted to-day what it prohibited yesterday, with no change in the circumstances to justify the change of front. By its own confession it is futile, having no power to enforce some of its most important directions. It can suppress a play which touches upon an ethical problem, but it cannot prevent an indecent "gag" or an immoral double-meaning conveyed by the actor's look or gesture. It is anomalous, since it is the one irresponsible and secret tribunal in the land. It is unjust, since, like the Jedburgh judges of Border history, it first hangs the prisoner and then tries him, or rather lets him do what he can to obtain a trial elsewhere. It is destructive, since it takes out of the people's hands a power which they alone can rightly wield, and thus deadens their feeling of responsibility for the morals of the stage. The first result of its abolition would be a quickening of the moral sense of theatrical audiences. Prudery rather than license would probably be the order of the day.

"Good manners, decorum, and the public peace" are placed by the statute under the Censor's ægis. Religion, morals, and politics—these are, in fact, the subjects of his care. He is a watchman to warn off the drama from the serious interests of life, swinging his fiery

*The Censor's charges: religion, morals, politics.*

sword in blinding circles around the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Let us see what terrible results would ensue if our autocratic and invulnerable angel-guardian were relieved from duty.

(i) *Religion :  
tabooed by the  
public even  
abroad.*

Would religion suffer? Would the tenets of Mr. Bradlaugh, or even of Mr. Matthew Arnold, find exponents on the stage? I think not. It is possible, on the contrary, that one or two attempts might be made to hold up these doctrines to ridicule, which would at once and signally fail. The public is as determined as any Censor can possibly be that such burning questions shall not be brought upon the stage. In France, where the censure is practically confined to politics, Sardou's "Daniel Rochat" is the only piece in which an attempt has been made to weigh faith against unfaith, and the public would not listen to it. In America, where there is no censorship,<sup>1</sup> the religious

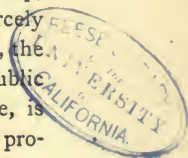
*Exceptions :  
" Daniel  
Rochat."*

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<sup>1</sup> "Public opinion," says the distinguished American critic, Mr. Brander Matthews, "compels decency. Now and again a low concert-saloon or very cheap theatre, making a special appeal to the lewd fellows of the baser sort, descends to overt acts of indecency, broad and flagrant—and then the police interfere. But this interference is only with plays wholly without literary pretence, and in theatres but little better than a 'penny gaff.' I know of no interference with any regular theatre." The writer then goes on to say that indecent or immoral plays,

question has been entirely avoided, except in the case of the said "Daniel Rochat," which was played with some success, the balance being made to decline on the side of faith. In Germany, where the censorship would probably not interfere with the discussion of religion on the stage, and where the public mind might be supposed to be ripe for it, there has been equally little tendency to make the attempt. In Scandinavia, one great poet has recently ventured a play in which the established religion of the land is attacked with mordant sarcasm; and, though there is no censorship, even his enormous reputation could scarcely tempt a manager to produce it. England, the favoured land where religion and the public peace are guarded by official omnipotence, is the only country where a play has been produced of recent years in which the religious question was so crudely and rashly handled that it threatened to lead to a breach of the

*Ibsen's "Gengangere."*



if by any chance attempted at theatres of the better class, are almost certain to fail. French plays are condensed and translated, not adapted and mutilated. With politics and religion the American stage has no relations whatever. A political satire is now and then produced, but never excites any feeling. "I think our audiences are less prudish and less prurient than yours," Mr. Matthews concludes; "they have a firmer moral tone."

*"The Promise of May."*

public peace. To do the Censor justice, it must be admitted that if "The Promise of May" had been the work of an unknown and struggling playwright, whose career, perhaps, depended upon its chance of success, he would never have thought of licensing it. As it was by a great poet, whose name appears next to his own in the list of Her Majesty's Household, he thought, perhaps, of the fate predicted for a household divided against itself, and determined to stretch a point in favour of the Laureate. The result was a stormy first night, and, at a subsequent performance, a scene of indignant protest. This experience will probably teach managers, for some time to come, to let Agnosticism alone; but, even if it does not, even if another "Promise of May" were to be produced to-morrow with the same result, would there be any great harm done, any such evil as to justify the maintenance of an irresponsible official who should, but does not, prevent it? The great body of the theatre-going public is conventionally religious—witness the watery piety which found favour in "The Silver King"—and is much less likely than the Censor to tolerate anything which endangers their religion. Mr. Boucicault tells us how, in "Old Heads and Young Hearts," when Charles Mathews knelt

*The public conventionally pious.*



to a lady and remarked, "I came to scoff, but I remain to pray," the audience mistook Goldsmith's line for a quotation from the Bible, and promptly hissed what they considered its flippant desecration. The same spirit of reverence is alive to this day, and the Censor's function with regard to religion can at best be to deprive certain pieces or speeches of an opportunity of being hissed, which, as before remarked, he in practice fails to do.

Let us take politics next, leaving to the last (ii) *Politics*. the more important subject of morals. What has been said of religion applies in a less degree to politics—namely, that pieces of strong political tendency would very rarely be produced, because they would be almost certain to fail. But supposing such a play to be produced, is England a country in which it is likely to lead to revolution, serious disturbance, or even the much-dreaded "breach of the peace"? We are accustomed to strong political argument and invective in the press; but that, say the defenders of the censure, is not to the point, since an invective delivered in print to a thousand people, at their thousand breakfast-tables, does not produce the same effect as it would if delivered by a skilled actor to the same thousand people assembled in the



*Excitement  
healthy in a  
Hall, noxious  
in a Theatre—  
Why?*

electric atmosphere of a theatre. Perhaps not; but a public meeting possesses this electricity of numbers, and a great orator is a skilled actor, using in deadly earnest the same weapons of satire and denunciation which are held so perilous in the mimic warfare of the stage. A public meeting, it may be objected, is sometimes—very rarely—riotous. True; but why should the excitement which in a public hall is considered a healthy sign of political life, be held dangerous and destructive in a theatre? Would not the same means by which the excitement is kept within bounds in the one case apply equally well in the other? And is it worth while to maintain an irresponsible official on the chance that he may, once in ten years, avert from the theatre an outburst of excitement such as occurs every night in some political assembly without doing the smallest harm to any one or anything?

*Aristophan-  
isms.*

As for political persiflage after the manner of "The Happy Land," it is hard to see why it should be given extreme license in the comic papers, and should be utterly repressed on the stage. Speaking of the play in which Mr. Buckstone was to have represented Lord John Russell, Mr. Shirley Brooks said, "I do not feel sure that the Aristophanic drama would

be such a very bad thing to restore." It would surely be an excellent thing, if we had but an Aristophanes. The only possible plea for repressing it is the old bugbear of the public peace, which was not in the least endangered by "The Happy Land," or on the numerous other occasions when would-be Aristophanisms have eluded the Censor's ken. John Bull's traditional phlegm is not so easily disturbed. On the music-hall stage, as we all know, songs of violent political tendency are nightly sung with no fatal results. One of these, at a crisis in our history, took such hold on the public mind that it added a word to the English language. Had Mr. Macdermott been a playwright, instead of a poet, he would have been informed that a drama of such strong tendency was calculated to arouse the angry passions of the Peace Society, and consequently could not be "recommended for license."

*Music-hall  
jingoism.*

We come lastly to the great question of morals. Here there is a distinction to be drawn between the different senses in which the word "immorality" is commonly used. It is applied on the one hand to indecency, obscenity, pruriency, and on the other to any form of thought or action, however conscientious, earnest, and high-principled, which trans-

(iii) *Morals.*

*The double  
meaning of  
"immor-  
ality."*

gresses the conventional rules of social decorum, or even touches upon matters which society has tacitly determined to wink at and let alone. Vulgar sensualism, and devotion to ideals more advanced than those of the crowd, are in popular parlance alike immoral. Now the policy of good government, if good government had in reality anything to do with the matter, would clearly be to repress the former and to give the latter as much currency as popular prejudice would allow. What, then, is the action of the censorship? Precisely the reverse. Vulgar sensualism it fails to repress, while it deadens the feeling of responsibility in that better portion of the public which otherwise should, and would, take the censorship into its own hands. Advanced ideals, nay, the mere handling of any problem of delicacy and importance, it most effectually represses, and will work more and more harm in this way as the stage becomes more serious, more cultured, better qualified to grapple with ethical questions. The public mind has room for strange contradictions. On the one hand, it hankers after coarse frivolity, hovering ever on the verge of the indecent, and none the less acceptable if it take an occasional flight over the frontier; on the other hand, it is prudish, squeamish,

*Vulgar  
sensualism  
fostered :*

*advanced  
ideals re-  
pressed.*

disinclined to judge actions to which conventional standards do not apply, and afraid to have the veil torn from the plague-spots of society. The prurient craving is openly pandered to with small check from the censorship, which utterly crushes any attempt to overcome the cowardly shrinking. Pieces which Mr. Burnand has excellently described as "immoralities in three acts" are licensed in shoals, vulgar and meaningless to outward appearance, but full of the most piquant meaning to those who can read between the lines; "Les Lionnes Pauvres" and "Le Supplice d'une Femme" are consigned to the limbo of still-born indecencies—

*"Prudery and prurience."*

"Vuolsi così colà dove si puote  
Ciò che si vuole."

The reader may fairly inquire as to the grounds for my belief that on the abolition of the censorship the clean-minded portion of the public would use its influence to repress the ribaldries which the prurient few at present demand. The matter is clearly incapable of present proof, but I think I can point to a strong probability; premising, however, that my argument against the censorship does not stand or fall on this issue. These, then, are

*The public and its duty.*

*Responsibility  
an education.*

my reasons for the faith that is in me. At present the public feels little or no responsibility for the morals of the stage; but the deliberate abolition of the censorship by the representatives of the people would be, in effect, a formal engagement on the part of the said people to assume the charge which, rightly considered, is inalienably theirs. The mere sense of responsibility is in itself an education, and there can be little doubt that many who now yield idly to their lower instincts and follow the lead of the corrupt few in laughing at inane and cynical indecencies, would then rally to the better side and protest against what "insults their soul." In every audience there are surely two or three persons sufficiently earnest in the cause of "good manners and decorum" to take the initiative in attacking wanton impropriety; and the protest even of two or three, it should be remembered, forces upon all the rest the onus of choosing a side, and either backing up the malcontents or actively approving the passage attacked. The right to hiss, I take it, depends upon whether the hisser does or does not express the sense of the audience, or at least of a majority; and when once the public is awakened to its responsibility, I am very much deceived if, in any

average audience, there would not be a clear majority on the side of decency. A little courage and public spirit on the part of a few, a little common sense and good feeling on the part of the many—that is all we require to effect a great reform. As soon as “risky lines” become really risky, actors will refuse to speak them, and girl-actresses will no longer be forced to employ their grace and naïveté in giving point to double-meanings which would stamp as a cad the man who should utter them in a club smoking-room. The problem is much simpler here than in France. The grossness of our stage is always stupid and almost always gratuitous, whereas in France it is inwoven in the texture of the lighter drama, so that to suppress it would be to suppress all that is wittiest and most characteristic in the dramatic literature of the day. The works of Labiche, Gondinet, and Meilhac and Halévy contain masterpieces of humour which are yet unspeakably and incorrigibly indecent. Sardou’s “Divorçons!” is a case in point; it is so inimitably witty that a conclave of the sternest Puritans might well be torn two ways as to whether it should be tolerated or suppressed. In England no such difficulty arises. Looking back over the past ten years I can scarcely

*Is there a  
clean-minded  
majority?*

*The problem  
easier than in  
France;*

*since "want of decency" here goes hand in hand with "want of sense."*

remember a single speech, much less a whole play, whose wit could be for a moment alleged to redeem its indecency. As a rule the grossness is deliberately dragged in, and could be as easily cast out. It is frequently so flagrant, and at the same time so unessential to the play, that one cannot but suppose it to be a "gag," or rather a deliberate interpolation in the text after it has passed through the Censor's hands. When this is the case, though the Censor may be blameless, the futility of his office is trebly demonstrated. Not even a Great Irresponsible can be in thirty theatres at once to see that his authority is respected; but the public, the true Censor, is always on the spot, and its authority no one can evade.

*The present Censor the victim of his office.*

In nothing that I have said do I intend any personal reflection upon the present Examiner of Plays. He simply performs with zeal and courtesy the duties of his anomalous office. He has shown at least as much tact and judgment as any of his predecessors, and at least as much as can reasonably be expected of any who may succeed him. He does not pretend to be infallible, and yet he is placed in an office which demands infallibility to balance its omnipotence. This is the tragi-comedy of his position. He is one of the two personages in



the British Empire who can do no wrong, and in these irreverent days such a constitutional fiction is apt to excite ridicule rather than awe. Unfortunately, it is much less of a fiction in the case of the Censor than in that of the Queen.

In this lies the final argument against the censorship, an argument which should be the strongest of all, but to the ordinary English mind is perhaps the weakest. It is an anomaly and an anachronism. The reader may think that I have harped too much upon its irresponsibility; but that is the first and last word of the whole matter. Its good or evil action in any one instance or any number of instances is of no real moment; it is irresponsible, therefore it is unwise, unsafe, unjust, un-English. So said Lord Chesterfield a century and a half ago, and we, to-day, can but repeat his words. So said Samuel Johnson, not, surely, a friend of undue license. So said Sainte-Beuve, though the traditions of the French and the spirit of their institutions are much less opposed to such an office: "Il y avait quelque chose (he writes) qu'on appelait autrefois la censure pour les théâtres; vilain nom, nom odieux, et qu'il faut dans tous les cas supprimer. Est-ce à dire qu'il faille supprimer toute surveillance?

*An anomaly  
and an ana-  
chronism.*

*Chesterfield.*

*Johnson.*

*Sainte-Beuve.*

*Proposed  
compromises,*

. . . Ce qui se passerait dans un bureau du ministère de l'intérieur serait de nature si nette et si franche, qu'à toute heure, à la première interpellation, il en pourrait être rendu bon compte au public du haut de la tribune, aux applaudissements des honnêtes gens." If we could even secure this publicity which Sainte-Beuve declares indispensable, it would always be a point gained. The suggested appeal to the Home Secretary would be cumbrous and not a little absurd; but even that would save a play from the silent annihilation to which it is now exposed. The late Mr. Shirley Brooks made a curious suggestion that a sort of theatrical Public Prosecutor should be appointed, whose duty it should be to hear and examine into any complaints of the public after the production of a play, and to apply the ordinary machinery of the law to the restraint of licence. If we still shrink from the perils of liberty, some such compromise might possibly be adopted. Meanwhile the fact remains—a fact which, but for the deadening force of custom, would seem to every one incredible and monstrous—that the property, and to a certain extent the reputation, of an industrious class of literary workmen, is absolutely at the mercy of a secret tribunal, consisting of from

*Delenda est  
censura!*

one to three Court officials, who at one stroke of the pen can annul the labour of months or years, giving no reason and allowing no appeal. The burglar is tried by a jury of his countrymen; the merest pickpocket, whose offence is so trifling as to be treated summarily, has justice administered to him before the public eye. The dramatist, who demands nothing more than to be tried by his peers, appeals in vain to the immemorial traditions of English freedom. There is not even a Habeas Corpus Act for the drama, but rather a Bastille or an Inquisition dungeon, whereto, in the memorable words of the Hon. Spencer Brabazon Ponsonby, "a play is merely banished, and there is an end of it." When will the nation's care for this great branch of literature be so aroused and enlightened that we may be able to retort this phrase upon its inventors, and say of the censorship, "It is banished, and there is an end of it?"

## THE ETHICS OF THEATRICAL CRITICISM.

*Waiting for  
the verdict.*

OF all the incidents of a career of crime—I speak, as yet, without personal experience, but on the authority of many intelligent felons—the ordeal known as waiting for the verdict is one of the most unpleasant. The dramatic interest, the nervous tension, of the trial is over, and a period of torturing inactivity ensues. The irretrievable errors of the past rise in grim array before the mind's eye—arguments unurged, admissions made in inadvertence, lies unharmonised, alibis disproved, nervous impatience to get rid of the body, rash haste in pawning the plate, and a hundred other slips into the gins and snares that beset the path of crime. In some cases remorse intervenes to pile horror on horror's head, and the unhappy wretch writhes at the thought, not only of errors after the fact, but of the fact itself, from the first conception of its possibility right on to the finishing stroke. It is done and cannot be undone. His head is

in the lion's mouth ; he feels the points of its fangs upon his throat ; will the mighty jaws open—or close ?

If any one wishes to experience these interesting sensations, yet is restrained by nervousness or class-prejudice from a straightforward plunge into burglary or murder, he cannot do better than write a play and have it produced at a London theatre. In the interval between its production, say on Saturday night, and the appearance of the leading newspapers on Monday morning he will acquire the most intimate experimental knowledge of the feelings of a murderer awaiting the verdict. In the commission of the crime there may have been some pleasure ; during the trial, or, in other words, the first performance, he has at least been buoyed up by excitement ; but between the fall of the curtain and the appearance of the criticisms there is nothing but dull inaction, unavailing regret, and torturing suspense. It may be objected that the analogy breaks down, inasmuch as a play, however unsuccessful, cannot be reckoned a felony or even a grave misdemeanour. “ Not failure, but low aim, is crime,” says Mr. Lowell, who, be it noted, has neither written plays nor criticized them. Had he done so he would have made an exception as

*The play-  
wright in the  
dock.*

*Failure a  
crime.*

regards the dramatic world, where low aim is a merit, and failure, so far as its results are concerned, little less than a crime. The author of a new play, like the proposer of a new law in Thurium, appears with a halter round his neck. By rare good fortune he may be dismissed without a stain on his character, and even with a certain amount of honour and glory; but the chances are that he finds himself gibbeted in half a hundred prints, great and small, for a fortnight to come. The first night no longer decides the fate of a play, bringing with it swift damnation or assured success. The final verdict lies, in most cases, with the critics; and though a first-night failure always bodes ill, a first-night success is but a fallacious omen for good. Many an author who has bowed and smiled to an enthusiastic house on Saturday night, has found on Monday morning that he had reckoned without his critics. A glance at the three or four leading organs of opinion will often reduce to zero his hopes of honour and of profit alike.

*The theatrical  
critic: his  
power for good  
or evil.*

From the very nature of the case, critics of plays and acting wield much more immediate if not much greater power than critics of the other arts. A poem or a picture remains to give the lie to an unjust judgment. Time is the

court of last resort which must sustain or reverse the verdict of the passing hour. But in the theatre there is no appeal. Here judgment and execution go hand in hand, as in the vaults of the Vehmgericht. A piece of acting, and even a play on our non-literary stage, are too ephemeral to make a successful struggle against injustice. As well might a butterfly engage in a Chancery suit. The actor or author, smarting under what he conceives to be a wrong, may writhe and cry out; the passers-by, unable or unconcerned to inquire into the case for themselves, merely shrug their shoulders and wonder why the fellow can't take his punishment like a man, since it doubtless serves him right. Of course there are compensations in the case. Many an actor enjoys a great traditional reputation which would not stand the test of a new trial; many a play has met with a favourable judgment which a less summary method of procedure would certainly have reversed. But unjust leniency in one case does not cancel unjust severity in another; indeed, the latter is probably the less hurtful of the two. All things considered, it is no exaggeration to say that there are in the literary world few more responsible positions than that of the dramatic critic of an influential daily paper. He has an



*A dispenser of  
pleasure and  
pain, fortune  
and failure.*

immense power of dealing out personal pleasure or pain to those whom he criticizes; a few strokes of his pen may involve the gain or loss of hundreds, nay, thousands, of pounds; and thousands of people are guided by his judgment in the selection of their theatrical fare. He may guide them nobly or ignobly, to the tables of the gods or to the troughs of the beasts that perish. In the course of time he may even create in the minds of his readers a certain habitual attitude towards the stage, on which the future of the English drama may in no small measure depend.

*The London  
Vehmgericht.*

It can scarcely be superfluous, then, to inquire a little into the qualifications which this office demands, the obligations which it imposes. Society has a right to interest itself in the constitution of a court from which there is no appeal, and which holds in its hands the fortune and professional reputation of a large number of citizens. The leading London critics of the day—a dozen, or at the outside a score, in number—form such a court. It may seem an exaggeration to say that there is no appeal from their judgment, but woe to him who has to trust to such a resource! Their verdict is well-nigh binding upon the provinces, it is heard with respect in America. Whenever they are

unanimous, as in effect is generally the case,<sup>1</sup> they are irresistible. Their dispraise of an actor may throw him back years in his career. Only in the rarest cases does a play survive their condemnation.

This power has grown with the growth and strengthened with the strength of the daily press. Shakespeare and Burbage knew nothing of it. They were probably but dimly acquainted with the momentary elation of success and dejection of failure which chequer the career of a playwright or actor of to-day. A little more or less applause on the first production of a play, a slight rise or fall in the receipts of subsequent performances, in these inarticulate ways did the public judgment utter itself. A play filled its place just like an average magazine article of to-day; it might attract more or less attention, but it was impossible to predicate of it absolute success or failure. In the eighteenth century theatrical life had become more self-conscious, and the art of criticism had its professors and its amateurs. "The critics," however, mainly consisted of a certain section of the paying

*Growth of  
criticism: The  
Elizabethan  
age.*

*The eighteenth  
century.*

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<sup>1</sup> This may seem a startling assertion, but it will be found that, amid all differences of detail, the unanimity of the critics in their final summing-up is generally surprising.

public, answering to our "first-nighters," who made it their business to be present whenever a new play or a new actor was brought forward, and either approved or incontinently damned as their humour suited, and then adjourned to the coffee-houses to talk it over. The criticism of the periodical press was short, perfunctory, stereotyped in its forms, personal in its methods, and made scarcely any pretence to impartiality. It fluctuated between the puff and the lampoon. Now and again some notable production, such as Addison's "Cato," would give rise to a war of pamphlets, laudatory and abusive. In the latter category the works of John Dennis hold a prominent place. Anything like the calmly judicial tone which criticism now endeavours to assume is scarcely to be found in the eighteenth century. That there were keen and able critics is not to be denied. A glance at the theatrical memoirs and satires of the century, at Cibber's "Apology" and Churchill's "Rosciad," suffices to prove that they existed. But there were no specialists in the art, no men who professedly devoted a large portion of their labour and study to giving the public an impartial record and estimate of the theatrical life of the day. The theatrical journals occasionally attempted were short-lived and tainted with unmistakable partizanship.

*Dennis.*

*Cibber.*

*Churchill.*

About the beginning of this century newspaper criticism, as we at present know it, was born. Then do we find Leigh Hunt in the *News* and the *Examiner* applying to the mannerism of John Kemble such satire as, if applied to Mr. Irving, would be denounced by his devotees as scurrilous and profane. Then do we find Hazlitt in the *Chronicle* and the *Times* proclaiming the genius of Edmund Kean while analyzing his performances with rare discrimination. It is noteworthy, as showing how little cause we have to mourn over a decadence in the living drama of the day, that these two writers either condemn or ignore the dramatic authors of their time, while they devote their whole attention to the actors. Leigh Hunt has the fangs of his sarcasm for ever fixed in Reynolds, Dibdin, and Cherry, and finds no merit in anything later than Sheridan and Goldsmith. His brother critics, too, he attacks unsparingly with reproaches very much like some which have been recently reiterated. He accuses them, among other things, of being more concerned to note "the fashionables in the boxes" than the actors on the stage, and hints, not darkly, that their enthusiasm is apt to be stimulated by managerial chicken and champagne.

*Nineteenth century.*

*Leigh Hunt.*

*Hazlitt.*

Here, too, I must name with reverence the

*Charles Lamb.* name of Charles Lamb, patron saint of English theatrical criticism. The few pages which he has devoted to this art may well be the despair of those that come after. With all his narrowness of view and taste for paradox, he had the insight, the sympathy, and the style which, could we but approach them, might transmute the journey-work of criticism into enduring literature.

The middle of the century found men of great ability engaged, at least occasionally, in theatrical criticism. Two of the most instructive and delightful books ever written on the drama are composed of studies made about this period—*G. H. Lewes.* George Henry Lewes's "Actors and Acting," and Professor Henry Morley's "Journal of a London Playgoer." These are in many respects models of what criticism should be, but they were produced under conditions widely different from those of the present day. Theatres were not so numerous as they are now, the theatrical public was very much smaller, theatrical enterprise did not involve such vast interests. Moreover, without unduly glorifying our own age, we may say that the native English drama has made a great stride since those days, while the French drama, with which English criticism is so largely concerned, has advanced from

Scribe to Augier. As we read Professor Morley's "Journal," interesting as it is, we cannot but reflect that, after all, the critics of thirty years since must have had a humdrum, easy time of it. A single season now brings as many "great events"—productions demanding serious thought and study—as are to be found in any five of the years chronicled by Professor Morley. To indicate the extent of the change, I may note that the opera as well as the theatres came under this genial critic's cognizance. At the present day it would be hard to find any one with the special knowledge of both subjects now considered indispensable, while no single man could possibly get through the amount of work involved in such a combination of offices. At the height of the season he would have to be in three or four theatres at once.

*Professor  
Morley.*

The delightful autobiography of Mr. Edmund Yates contains an anecdote which aptly illustrates the conditions of criticism thirty years ago, and the estimation in which the drama was held in the high places of journalism. Speaking of Mr. John Oxenford, Mr. Yates says:—"When he first took up dramatic criticism for the *Times* he wrote unreservedly his opinion, not merely of the play under notice, but of the actors. One of these, being somewhat sharply

*John Oxenford  
and the Times.*

criticized, appealed in a strong letter to the editor, which Mr. Delane showed to John Oxenford. 'I have no doubt you were perfectly right in all you wrote,' said the great editor to the embryo critic; 'but that is not the question. The real fact is that these matters are of far too small importance to become subjects for discussion. Whether a play is good or bad, whether a man acts well or ill, is of very little consequence to the great body of our readers, and I could not think of letting the paper become the field for argument on the point. So in future, you understand, my good fellow, write your notices so as much as possible to avoid these sort of letters being addressed to the office. You understand?' Oxenford understood; and in that interview the *Times* editor voluntarily threw away the chance of being supplied with dramatic criticism as keen in its perspicacity as Hazlitt's, as delightful in its geniality as Lamb's." Critical morality may or may not have advanced since these days, but at least editors are no longer so blind to their own interests.

"Oxenford understood."

*The present day.*

I cannot continue this sketch of the progress of criticism without naming contemporary workers in the field, whom it would be presumption in me to mention whether with praise



or blame. Suffice it to say, that as theatrical life has widened, and public interest in the drama has increased, all the leading organs of opinion have found it to their interest to devote to the theatre that careful attention which only a few used formerly to bestow upon it. Already in 1866 Professor Morley notes how "there has sprung up during the last three or four years in several of our journals a healthy little breeze of public criticism." The time is now long past when a freshman on the staff of a newspaper was sent to do the dramatic criticism, with the hope of rising, by diligence and good luck, to the office of police-court reporter. Men of education and experience fill the critical stalls; men who can rub shoulders on equal terms with the representatives of literature and art whom an important first-night now attracts to the theatre. Even the higher criticism, as I have pointed out in a previous essay, no longer disdains the drama, but ranks it among the topics upon which it keeps a watchful eye.

*A healthy  
breeze of criti-  
cism.*

*page 6.*

My purpose, then, is not to criticize the critics, but to state a few of the doubts and difficulties which beset their path. Speaking as a humble member of the confraternity, I wish to dwell on some of its manifold responsibilities. We have duties to fulfil towards

*Duties and  
difficulties.*

managers, authors, and actors, towards the public of the day, and towards English literature at large. What are these duties? And what are the main obstacles to their fulfilment?

*Common honesty pre-supposed.*

We may take for granted, in the first place, that honesty without which sound criticism is impossible. The critic who, from whatever motive, calls a thing good which he believes to be bad, or bad which he believes to be good, is clearly false to his fundamental duty—the duty towards himself. Involuntary bias, involuntary narrowness, involuntary blindness, are quite sufficiently active sources of error. I should be sorry to insult my cloth by dwelling upon voluntary falsity, whether mercenary or malevolent, as a thing probable or even possible.

*Should critics be playwrights?*

Granted this cardinal virtue, or rather this freedom from original sin, I would plead for a robuster code of critical morality than some people are prepared to sanction. For instance, we hear it spoken of as an enormity that a critic should either write or adapt plays. Why not? Though it be a fallacy that no one can criticize an art who has not practised it, there is yet no doubt that the most valuable insight into the technique of dramatic writing is to be obtained either by original effort in the field, or by the analysis and reconstruction of foreign work

*Why not?*

which is involved in the act of adaptation. Why must we conclude that what the critic gains in knowledge he loses in moral fibre? Given common honesty, he can surely resist the not very terrible temptations thus thrown in his way. A man who would virulently condemn a rival adapter or slavishly praise a manager from whom he expects an order, is of the corrupt, corruptible, and would be bribed or bought in some other way, though a law should be passed separating the professions of critic and playwright as jealously as those of solicitor and barrister. It would be sad for English criticism did we require to sing "Lead us not into temptation" in this pitiful key.

A much more delicate and difficult question is that of the extent to which a critic may wisely enter into personal relations with actors and authors. It is foolish to argue that he should shun those whom he has to criticize, as though they brought with them a contagion not to be escaped save by the disinfectant intervention of the footlights; yet it seems to me that the air of the theatrical clubs is but moderately conducive to sound criticism. Involuntary bias of all sorts is only too easily contracted in these pleasant caravanserais. How far he may yield to their charms is a question upon which each

*Should they  
fraternize with  
actors and  
authors.*

*A personal  
confession.*

critic must be a law unto himself. He will determine according to the strength or weakness of his critical judgment ; if it be strong, he may brave the danger ; if it be weak, he will do well to shun it. I may perhaps be allowed to illustrate my meaning from my own experience. Rightly or wrongly, I have very strong opinions as to the merits of plays, and can give reasons, good, bad, or indifferent, for the faith that is in me. But on questions of acting my judgment is more or less infirm. Striking genius and utter incompetence I can recognize as well as another, but in the vast debatable land of respectable mediocrity I am very much astray. My judgment changes from time to time ; what pleased me last year may bore or shock me to-day ; and moreover I find myself at variance on questions of acting with critics to whose judgment I cannot but bow. Therefore I avoid the society of actors, while as regards authors I have no such scruple. My judgment of plays errs on the side of dogmatism ; it will formulate and express itself, rightly or wrongly, in spite of all possible friendship or enmity. In criticizing adversely the work of an acquaintance I may perhaps take unusual pains to be courteous, but courtesy towards friends is no fault ; on the contrary, I think with contrition of the occasions

when I may have been betrayed into discourtesy towards strangers. I believe, then, that I can resist any tendency to bias arising from personal acquaintance with authors, while with actors I am conscious that the reverse is the case. To know an actor is to render my judgment of his performances doubly undecided. I may know him so slightly as to be quite unaffected by personal regard or dislike, yet the mere familiarity with his looks, tones, and manners in private life unsettles my estimate of him as an artist. The bias thus created is often to his disadvantage.<sup>1</sup> I seem to have got once for all behind his mask, so that nothing he may do produces a perfect illusion. The result is that my praise or blame of him is thenceforth half-hearted and conventional. I feel that the mirror in which I see him is warped. The image presents a misty and blurred outline, and I have to try by a laborious effort of mind to reconstruct its true contours. Since the moment when this effect became clear to me, I have avoided, as far as possible, the company of actors, even though I thereby incurred a certain loss; for there is

*Bias occasioned  
by "knowing  
an actor."*

*Often to his  
disadvantage.*

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<sup>1</sup> Is it to this tendency that Hazlitt alludes when he says, "The only person on the stage with whom I have ever had any intercourse is Mr. Liston, and of him I have not spoken 'with the malice of a friend'?"

*Actors "talking shop."*

nothing more instructive than to hear a party of actors "talking shop." What little insight I may possess into the technique of the art has been gained from conversation with actors. Had I the advantage of knowing a veteran whom there was no chance of my ever having to criticize, I should sit at his feet with reverent attention, assured of acquiring, directly or indirectly, the most valuable knowledge of the methods of his art. In the society of players on the active list I feel that I am paying too dearly for my whistle.

My only excuse for the egoism of these confessions is that they illustrate my meaning. A weak judgment should avoid the risk of bias, a firm judgment may brave it. The critic must search his own soul, form an honest estimate of his strength and his weakness, and act loyally in accordance with that estimate. It may be mistaken, but if he has done his best he can do no more.

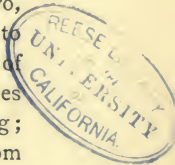
*Critic and paragraphist.*

We may take it as a general rule, that the task of criticism should, as far as possible, be kept apart from that of purveying news and gossip. The theatrical paragraphist has his distinct place in the world of journalism, since the public is from of old eager for glimpses behind the scenes. He must haunt the clubs



and coteries, sometimes, alas! the bars and tap-rooms, and must enter into direct relations with "the profession" at large. All this the critic should avoid, unless he is content to become a mere chronicler of dramatic events. The plan adopted by the Paris *Figaro* in dealing with the drama may be commended for imitation. It has a serious and able critic in the person of M. Auguste Vitu; a witty chronicler of first-night incidents and gossip, who writes under the signature of "Un Monsieur de l'Orchestre;"<sup>1</sup> and in addition to these two, a theatrical sub-editor, who does not attempt to give any literary form to his daily column of mere news. M. Vitu, from his stall, devotes his whole attention to the play and the acting; the "Monsieur de l'Orchestre" flits about from the crush-room to the green-room, records the emotions and sayings of the actors, describes the dresses of the ladies, enumerates the "fashionables in the boxes," to use Leigh Hunt's phrase, and, in short, chronicles the hundred trifles which go to make up a Parisian "Soirée Théâtrale." This is a wise division of labour. There is no possible reason why the

*The practice in Paris.*



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<sup>1</sup> The original "Monsieur de l'Orchestre," Arnold Mortier, died in January, 1885, and has been succeeded by M. Emile Blavet, a writer of much less vivacity.



*The social event distinguished from the artistic event.*

public should not be gratified with an account of the incidents of a first-night, which, after all, is a social event like any other; but there is every reason why the social event and the artistic event should be kept distinct and treated of separately. The purveyor of news is always under a certain obligation to those who provide him with it; the critic should be under no obligation to any one.

*Truth manifold,*

So far we have been considering the means by which a critic may avoid bias and undue influence, and form an unprejudiced as well as an honest judgment. But a greater problem remains behind. Having formed his honest judgment, how is he to utter it? "Truthfully," is the obvious answer; but about any work of art there are many different truths to be told and many different ways of telling them. It may be strictly truthful to say of a picture that its frame is gorgeously gilt, or, like the Yorkshire critic, to assure the public that "the paint must have cost a matter of five pounds, let alone the man's time a-laying of it on;" and this is a form of truth by no means uncommon in the theatrical criticism of the day. Even when we come nearer to telling the whole truth, or rather the essential truth, we may temper it in fifty different ways. We may serve it up with

honey or with vinegar. We may hurl it forth with Carlylean emphasis, or enunciate it with the sweet-reasonableness of Emerson. We may make it cut like a sword, sting like a whip, or soothe like a caress. There is of course a time for everything: a time to be bitter and a time to be sweet; a time to speak, as the French say, "brutally," and a time to use conventional phrases; a time for indignation and a time for persiflage; a time to "slate" and a time to refrain from slating. The critic's motive-power should be enthusiasm for the best interests of the English stage, but tact must be the rudder which shapes his course.

*and many ways  
of telling it.*

One thing is quite evident, namely, that the critic must be an opportunist. He must rarely give rein to the idealist in his composition. He must take the drama as he finds it, and give its due credit to all honest workmanship, even on a quite unideal level. It is only Beau Tibbs who demands to have his money returned because a frank farce is not "a tragedy or an epic poem, stap my vitals!" The satyr-play has its artistic justification as well as the trilogy. Honest fooling is not to be despised; indeed it is much more useful and respectable than pretentious heroics. It necessarily and rightly occupies a large place on any popular stage.

*The critic an  
opportunist,*

*neither an  
inflexible  
idealist nor a  
fad-monger*

It has its own standards by which to be tried. We must not attempt to find the height of a sugar-loaf by barometric observations, and then cry out upon its pettiness, because the atmosphere at the top is not sensibly rarer than at the bottom. Only when the fooling becomes dishonest is it to be absolutely condemned—when it panders to pruriency, when it vulgarizes what is beautiful and venerable, whether in human nature, or in history, or in art, and when it descends to mere witless imbecility, which, if it does nothing else, dulls the public sense for worthier humour. Even then there is a just mean to be observed in denunciation. Disproportionate ire tends to secure for the managers of the Nudity and Frivolity theatres the very successes of scandal which they most covet; and one cannot do the drama a greater disservice. When, as is usually the case, an immoral play is dull and puerile as well, let us dwell on the dulness rather than on the immorality; when it happens to be clever and amusing, let us give the devil his due, and say so. Nothing can be more hurtful to a critic's influence than a moral Charles the First's head shaking its gory locks in everything he writes. People refuse to be rough-riden day after day or week after week by a hobby, however re-

spectable. Though we be as virtuous as Malvolio, there will still be a demand for cakes and ale which will still find its supply. The critic's function is not that of the temperance lecturer, but of the public analyst; not to denounce the fare altogether, but to give people clearly to understand the true nature of what they are consuming.

*— an analyst  
rather than a  
homilist.*

When we come to the higher walks of the drama, catholicity of taste is still a prime requisite of good criticism. If I have a private partiality for five-act tragedies in blank verse—this, thank heaven, is a mere hypothesis—let me not therefore sneer at stirring melodrama and pooh-pooh modern comedy. The critic must always start, indeed, from his own individual impressions. To like and dislike vividly and heartily is his first qualification. He must not be always posturing in his judgments, and considering what he ought to like rather than what he does like; but neither must he make fetishes of his fads and sacrifice everything to them. Let him always dwell on the merits as well as the defects of earnest effort, however imperfect. Let him not be imposed upon by pretentious claptrap, but stand unshaken and unawed amid papier-maché earthquakes and avalanches of blank verse, main-

*Catholicity  
essential in the  
higher sphere*

*along with  
sanity of judgment*

taining, as Emerson says, "that a pop-gun is a pop-gun, though the ancient and honourable of this world affirm it to be the crack of doom." When his judgment is at variance with that of the majority, let him give full weight to the popular verdict, and tell how the piece pleased the gods though it displeased Cato—or vice versâ. Let him avoid, as far as possible, critical commonplaces, such as "the idea is not strikingly original, the characters are either lay figures or caricatures," and so forth. Such remarks may be taken for granted in the vast majority of cases. What we demand of a playwright is not to tell an absolutely new story, but to tell his old story freshly and well. If, by chance, he does hit on a novel theme or draw a character with keen and just observation, let us point it out as a striking merit, instead of sneering at him, in other cases, for a defect which, in these days, is almost inseparable from the conditions under which he works. Above all things, let us in this sphere keep our moral judgment on the alert. The no-ideals of irresponsible farce are much less injurious than the false ideals of would-be moral comedy and drama. An undue concession to narrow prejudice or cowardly convention should be unsparingly denounced because it is insidiously and subtly destructive.

*and alertness  
of the moral  
sense.*

That a critic should own a serious artistic ideal seems to me beyond doubt, though he should not fall into the Quixotic monomania of attempting to chastise every one who does not do homage to his particular Dulcinea. To sit stolidly at one point of view is not a practical method of criticism. M. Zola has tried it in France, and despite his keenness of observation and vigour of style, he cannot be said either to have depicted the French stage truly, or (as a critic) to have influenced its development. This is an error, however, into which we in England are little apt to fall. The lack of a progressive ideal is our great weakness. Where we have any ideal at all, it is too apt to be retrogressive. Some of us are inclined to accept the gospel according to Shakespeare as a final revelation in which are summed up all the law and the prophets. Now the true relation of Shakespeare to our modern stage is a very delicate question not to be determined in a volume, much less in a paragraph. So much, however, is clear: to play Shakespeare worthily may be a high function of the English stage, but cannot be the highest; while to imitate Shakespeare, if it be a rational endeavour at all, cannot be the noblest aim of the English dramatist. Shakespeare may be

*Ideals, progressive and retrogressive.*



*The modern  
ideal neither  
Aristotelian  
nor Shake-  
spearean.*

a part, but cannot be the whole, or even the greater part, of a worthy critical ideal. Lessing, if I may say it with reverence and gratitude, pinned his faith to an Aristotelian foot-rule quite inapplicable to the Teutonic drama. In the same way a Shakespearean standard is now an anachronism. It may be too long or too short—I suspect it is both at once—but in any case it is useless and cumbersome.

*The technique  
of criticism :*

It does not come within my purpose to say much of what may be called the technique of theatrical criticism, the literary forms best suited for it. These must be determined by the demands of the audience whom the critic addresses. There are three well-defined methods

*Three methods.*

(i) *The  
narrative.*

of dealing with a theatrical production: the narrative, the historic or anecdotic, and the analytic or critical properly so called. To tell in detail the plot of a play is a difficult and sometimes an unprofitable task. Unless the tale is told with unusual narrative power it is almost certain to be tedious and confusing. Even if it escapes this danger, it is apt to convey an unfair impression of the play, and to take the edge off the reader's curiosity and interest when he comes to see it. Yet this method is necessarily adopted by the critics of the daily papers, addressing a public to



which a new production is primarily an item of news, and only secondarily a piece of literature. The leading Parisian critics, too, incline more or less to the narrative form. Perhaps the true mean is hit by M. Francisque Sarcey, who, seizing with just instinct upon the central situation or idea of a play, gives, in a paragraph, a better insight into its plot than a less skilful writer might give in a column, and thus endows his analytic narrative, if I may call it so, with the chief attractions and advantages of both styles. The historic and anecdotic method is much in vogue with writers who have a long memory and a gossiping style. They dwell on former revivals, on the actors who have filled this part and that since the days of Betterton, on the fortunes of this or that French original when it was produced in Paris. Even in dealing with new plays they love to discover analogies with forgotten efforts of unremembered playwrights. Of such work one can only say that though often interesting and delightful, it is not criticism. The analytic method has this disadvantage, that it tends to become dry and technical, to address itself to authors and actors rather than to the great public. Conscious of this tendency, the critic should strive against it, repress what is peda-

(ii) *The anecdotic.*

(iii) *The analytic.*

*Criticism of  
plays more  
profitable than  
criticism of  
acting,*

gotic in his style, and remember with Hazlitt that "the insipid must at all events be avoided as that which the public abhors most." If I may hint at what seems to me a fault in English criticism, I should say that too much space is given up to phrases, more or less conventional, with regard to the actors, while the merits of the play are often superficially considered. This habit has survived from the time when English plays were merely contemptible, while some of the greatest actors the world has ever seen afforded material for detailed criticism, neither conventional nor stereotyped; from the time when Leigh Hunt dismissed "Reynolds, Dibdin, and Cherry," as beneath the notice of a rational man, and devoted his whole attention to John Philip Kemble, Mrs. Siddons, Mrs. Jordan, Elliston, and their great contemporaries. Now, the times have changed. The merit of our plays and of our acting is more nearly on a level; and this being so, it seems to me that criticism of acting, in which individual whim and fancy, sympathy and antipathy, necessarily play a large part, is at once less fruitful and less interesting than criticism of plays. This impression may be due to my own keener interest in authorship than in acting, but it seems to be shared by the

leading French critics, who, even in dealing with the Comédie Française, make their comments on the actors very short indeed. I do not argue that acting should be by any means neglected, but merely that the critic need not hold it his duty to assign particular praise or blame to each individual member of a large cast. Sometimes the acting demands careful consideration, since the play must be seen, so to speak, through its performance, and the merits and defects inherent in the one separated from the merits and defects proper to the other; but as a general rule the play, which is, or ought to be, a piece of English literature, is of greater importance than the acting, however meritorious.

*except when  
the one is  
bound up in  
the other.*

The Earl of Lytton in a recent article<sup>1</sup> revived an old discussion as to the merits and defects of the system of first-night criticism. Its defects, indeed, are patent enough. That an artist who has devoted months, perhaps years, to the study of a great Shakespearean part, should have to stand or fall by the impressions conveyed to the critics on one nervous evening, and that the most influential of these critics should have to formulate their impressions at

*First-night  
criticism:  
Its defects,*

<sup>1</sup> *Nineteenth Century*, December, 1884.

*and its excuses.*

*Suggested  
remedies :  
A "critics'  
night."*

lightning speed, with no time for reflection, and with nerves either jaded or over-stimulated, is clearly not an ideal condition of things. The merits of the system, on the other hand, are not positive merits but mere excuses, resolving themselves into the assertion that, for the present at any rate, no other plan is practicable. This is quite true. The public demands immediate news of an important theatrical production just as of a debate in Parliament or a dynamite explosion. Even if this were not so, the idea which has sometimes been mooted of establishing a "critics' night" (the third or fourth performance) would in nowise mend matters, as it would merely expose actors to two nervous ordeals instead of one. The remedy which has sometimes been attempted, of inviting the critics to an elaborate dress rehearsal before the public first-night, is open to grave objection, and is in most cases scarcely practicable. The true remedy lies in inducing the critics and the public to accept and make allowance for the fact that the midnight column must often be provisional, perfunctory, inconclusive. Many slight productions, and even some more or less pretentious performances, can be analyzed and disposed of in an hour as well as in a month; but others demand even

from the readiest and rapidest critic a more attentive and leisurely study than the conditions of daily journalism permit. It has sometimes occurred to me that this difficulty might be got over if the critic were suffered to separate the two halves of his duty, reporting, that is to say, and criticism properly so called. On the night of the first performance he might play the reporter, indicating the plot of a new play, describing the scenic and spectacular sensations of a melodrama or Shakespearean revival, stating how the piece and the performers were received by the public, and, in short, treating the production as an item of mere news. This done, he might leave his criticism proper to a weekly feuilleton, written with all due deliberation and after a second visit (if necessary) to the theatre, which the readers of the paper would learn to look for on some stated day. Most editors, even of to-day, would no doubt treat such a suggestion as Mr. Delane treated John Oxenford's attempt at serious criticism. They would say, "Whether a play is good or bad, my good fellow, whether a man acts well or ill, is of very little consequence to the great body of our readers." But the body of newspaper readers to whom the merits of a play or actor are matters of very considerable consequence is

*Report in  
haste, criticise  
at leisure.*

*A weekly  
feuilleton.*

already large, and is daily increasing. Out of consideration for them, as well as in justice to managers, authors, and actors, it might be well to make some attempt to soften the crudities of first-night criticism.

*Great art  
breeds good  
criticism.*

It is said that an age of great art is never an age of great criticism ; but this could only hold good while the world was young. Once for all, society has become self-conscious, and henceforward the rule must be, the greater the art the greater the criticism. The mention of great art and the modern English drama in one breath may seem a quaint and incongruous juxtaposition ; yet we must have a certain amount of faith in the future of the stage, else why waste time in considering the conditions of theatrical criticism ? The drama is not dead but liveth, and contains the germs of better things. It lies with criticism to foster these germs, and, in the very effort, to develop its own better possibilities. When the drama takes its place once more among the highest forms in which English thought can utter itself, the criticism of a literary stage will itself become literature.

### CRITICS' ENGLISH.

THE theatrical critic who desires to write, I do not say a good style, but English of moderate purity, has a hard time of it. He must guard his vocabulary against insidious Gallicisms as sedulously as our Australian cousins guard their unsullied shores against the influx of refugees from New Caledonia. In the paths of theatrical criticism we come every now and then to a yawning chasm, over which some French word or phrase offers an easy bridge, only too tempting to indolence and carelessness. Prouder and more strenuous spirits, unwilling to incur this humiliating obligation to a foreign tongue, can sometimes clear the gulf by an audacious and more or less ungraceful linguistic leap, sometimes avoid it by a long and laborious circumlocution; but the chasm is often so impassable that even the boldest and proudest believer in English undefiled is compelled to have recourse to the Gallic gangway,

*Insidious  
Gallicisms*



on pain of finding himself at a dead stop. Would it not be possible and convenient to provide brand new English bridges for some of the widest of these abysses, or at any rate to annex and Anglicize (instead of italicizing) the French constructions?

*to be expelled  
or interned.*

I can surely reckon on allies and sympathizers in this patriotic cause. There must be many theatrical scribes whose life is, like my own, a perpetual struggle against italics. To interlard one's writing with scraps of French seems to me unworthy of any one but a disciple of Ouida; yet who can write of the Lyceum without mentioning *mise en scène*, or of the Princess's without alluding to *coups de théâtre*? These are only two of the most persevering and irrepressible intruders; there are at least a score of others, eager to slip in at any moment through the smallest breach in our defences. Can we not, once for all, either expel them or "intern" them—invent new terms to supply their places, or print them in ordinary roman type, and pronounce them as English words? For my part, I hold with De Quincey that it is permissible "to neologize a little in a case justifying a neologism."

*Words to  
be annexed.*

Where the French words are unaccented, and contain no sound foreign to the English tongue,

the simple method is to adopt them as they stand. Our composite speech cannot aspire to absolute purity. Its great advantage is its power of ready assimilation, and the Americans, less squeamish than we, are exercising this power to the utmost. I confess I rather shrink from "ensemble" and "abandon," pronounced as English words, though the latter is convenient, and the former absolutely necessary. If any recognized English equivalents can be suggested, so much the better; but I have searched for them in vain. Failing such substitutes, our ears will doubtless accustom themselves to what now seem barbarisms, and "ensemble" will not strike us as French, any more than "fiasco" and "gusto" (much more foreign-seeming words) now strike us as Italian. *Succès d'estime* and *succès de scandale*, it seems to me, should simply be naturalized under the forms of "success of esteem" and "success of scandal" respectively. *Ficelle*, a useful technicality, is easily pronounceable, and may be annexed without scruple. There is no need to use the French *répertoire* when we have the good English "repertory" ready to hand. *Queue* (a word and thing not common enough in England) might conveniently retain its French spelling to distinguish it from "cue,"

*Ensemble and  
abandon.*

*Success of  
esteem, &c.*

*Ficelle.*

*Repertory.*

*Queue.*

but should be pronounced as an English word, and written without italics. *Opéra-bouffe* (a word and thing too common in England) should at once become plain "opera-bouffe." *Claque* (a thing which no one will wish to see introduced into England, though the word is convenient on occasion) need not be italicized any more than "unique" or "pique," the final "que" merely serving to indicate a slight lengthening of the preceding vowel. The mention of "unique" and "pique" reminds me that I should like to put in a plea for two words of similar sound, which, though originally French, have been annexed by Germany, and have there assumed a peculiar form and shade of signification—I mean *plastik* and *mimik*. The former especially is almost indispensable, and should be adopted into English forthwith. "Her *plastik* was remarkable" expresses a shade of meaning which no use of "pose" or "attitude" could quite bring out. I see no reason, again, why we should not drop the accent from *tragédienne* and *comédienne*, and print and pronounce them as English words. "Tragic actress" and "comic actress" are cumbrous expressions, which, besides, do not convey the precise shade of meaning intended. *Soubrette* seems ready-made for English

tongues, though I note that the late Mr. Dutton Cook, who was singularly careful not to use French words unnecessarily, seems always to have italicized it.

But when we pass from *soubrette* to *ingénue*, we come to a difficulty. We cannot simply adopt it into English, and pronounce it "injenew." Such a barbarism is repellent to the ear; and though the logical distinction between this case and that of "ensemble" may not be apparent, I believe that even the Americans have trusted to their ears rather than their logic, and have accepted the one and rejected the other. Yet it is important that we should have some word to designate the charming phenomenon in question, for the French word, even if there were no other objection to retaining it in its original form, happens to be one of those which Englishmen are apt to pronounce after the manner of Stratford-atte-Bowe. How are we to represent *ingénue* in plain English? I confess that the problem baffles my ingenuity.

*Words that  
decline  
annexation.*

*Ingénue.*

A similar difficulty occurs in the case of *jeune premier*. Such phrases as "juvenile lead" are too technical, and besides, we require a substantive which can be used without circumlocution. "He is an excellent first-young-man"

*Jeune premier.*

sounds cumbersome and absurd ; but what are we to say ?

Pièce de  
circonstance.

*Pièce de circonstance*, again, a phrase constantly coming to the surface, defies translation. As we say of a volume, however weighty, which treats an ephemeral theme in an ephemeral fashion, that it is not a book but a pamphlet, so we might describe a *pièce de circonstance* as a "pamphlet play." Failing this, I see nothing for it but a tedious circumlocution.

Mise en scène.

Lastly, we come to the three or four most troublesome Gallicisms, those which force themselves upon us most frequently, and which we have the greatest difficulty in replacing or doing without. The first of these is *mise en scène*, a term which keeps importunately plucking at our sleeve, or rather forcing itself imperatively to the point of our pen. The Germans have invented an equivalent, "Inszenierung," but we have none which quite covers the ground. "Mounting" does not exactly express it; perhaps the American word "staging," with its correlative verb "to stage" a piece, comes nearest to the mark. But when we want to say of Mr. Irving, for instance, or of Mr. Gilbert, that he is a capital *metteur en scène*, this does not help us. To call him "a good stager" might be considered insulting, and "a good

stage-manager" expresses only part of the idea; so again we are on our beam ends.

*Lever de rideau* is another difficult phrase. Lever de rideau.

"Opening piece" does not quite express the idea, and "curtain-raiser" sounds uncouth.

This, however, is of less importance than *coup* Coup de théâtre.  
*de théâtre*, a term which it is almost impossible

to render. One might safely offer a handsome prize for any moderately available English equivalent for this phrase, which, on the other hand, is one of the most useful in the whole theatrical vocabulary. Mr. Swinburne has boldly rendered *coup d'état* into "stroke of state;" would it be possible to represent *coup de théâtre* by such a phrase as "stage-stroke"?

Even more necessary, and almost as hard to English (as Dr. Furnivall would say) is *dénouement*.

Dénouement.

Sometimes, but very rarely, "catastrophe" (a word which we have come to use very loosely) may stand in its place; and occasionally the feeble "conclusion" may serve for lack of a better. Some one—I think it is De Quincey—has suggested "evolution" or "disentangling," but neither of these seems very satisfactory. I have sometimes been tempted to try "unravelling," and some such word, if we could secure its general recognition, might serve the purpose. One point, at least,

would be gained if the word "nodus" were accepted as an English word, not requiring italics; for until the "knot" of a play is regarded under that convenient and time-honoured figure, neither *dénouement* nor any English equivalent will convey its due signification to the popular mind.

*Solution :  
survival of  
the fittest.*

Natural selection and the survival of the fittest hold good in matters of language as well as in the physical world; for are not words organisms of long descent and intricate life-history? It is impossible to force words into use which do not justify themselves as the right words to fill the right places. But it is surely an insult to our mother-tongue to suppose that no English words can be found or fashioned which shall fitly fill the places of these French theatrical terms, of which, by the way, I do not pretend to have given an exhaustive list. The predominant influence of the French in our theatre has made us accept their technology, just as they have adopted our jargon of the turf; but since the English stage is gradually throwing off foreign domination, it is surely time that we should either reject or completely assimilate the foreign vocabulary, and no longer deface our dramatic columns with sporadic eruptions of italics.



## *A STORM IN STAGELAND :*

### THE ETHICS OF ACTING.

ABOUT every new country there are conflicting reports. Emigration agents represent it as an Eden, disappointed travellers declare it to be a dismal swamp, and the truth, as a rule, lies between the two extremes. *The new El Dorado.*

Stageland is a newly-discovered country, in the sense, at least, that its capabilities as an outlet for the superfluous energies of the upper and middle classes have only recently been brought into notice. The discovery of gold in 1847 made California practically a new country, though its existence had been known and its history recorded for centuries. In the same way, gold mines have been discovered in Stageland, a rush has set in, and, behold ! the air is full of conflicting rumours as to its climate, the manners and customs of the natives, the economic and social prospects of the community,

and, in short, its general merits as a field for emigration.

*The point at issue.*

In this controversy, to drop metaphor, many irrelevancies have been put forward, and much bad logic perpetrated. The beginners of the fray were mainly concerned about words and conventions—whether acting was a “profession,” whether actors, as such, had a recognized status in society, and so forth. Not until these matters had been thrashed out was there any serious attempt to discuss the one point of permanent importance—namely, the inherent merits and demerits of acting as a form of human activity, its necessary influence upon character, its tendency to help or hinder a healthy and worthy spiritual life. It is to be hoped that some, at least, of the young men and maidens who are crowding to the stage, are less concerned as to whether society will respect them as members of a profession, than as to whether they can respect themselves in the exercise of that profession, art, calling, vocation, or what you will.

*Mrs. Kendal's gauntlet.*

It was Mrs. Kendal, in her recklessly candid Social-Science address at Birmingham, that flung forth the apple of discord. “There is at last a recognized social position for the professional player,” she said. “The theatrical profession is acknowledged to be a high and im-

portant one, and the society of the intelligent and cultivated actor is eagerly sought after. . . . The terms of actor and gentleman may now be regarded as synonymous." This somewhat sweeping statement aroused the ire of Mr. F. C. Burnand, who wrote an article in the *Fortnightly Review*, to prove that the social status of the actor is no better than it should be, and should be no better than it is. There were heroes before Agamemnon, said Mr. Burnand, and theatrical lions and lionesses before Mr. Irving and Mrs. Kendal. The percentage of actors who are received in good society has diminished rather than increased. "A profession" being defined as a calling recognized and limited by law, only to be entered through a certain statutory course of training generally accompanied by examinations, it is clear that acting is not a profession. The British Philistine would not willingly have his son an actor, or an actor for his son-in-law; and the British matron, when her daughter goes on the stage, must endure the pangs of a hen who has hatched a duckling, in seeing her child launch forth upon stormy waters, where the maternal wing can no longer protect her. This is the sum and substance of Mr. Burnand's article,—that audacious utterance which spread sudden dismay through

*Mr. Burnand  
takes it up.*

*His thesis a  
truism.*

Stageland, like thunder from a clear sky,—and on examining it we find that it can be reduced to a truism, and packed in a nutshell. The barrister, the clergyman, or the soldier, is respected by society *because of* his calling, the actor *in spite of* his calling—that is Mr. Burnand's argument, and that no reasonable person will deny. Striking success is, in the eyes of the world, a patent of nobility. It will make any calling reputable that is not positively felonious. But is the unsuccessful, or even the moderately successful but undistinguished actor, received in what Jeames calls the "hupper suckles" on the mere strength of being an actor? And, on the other hand, is the briefless barrister or the undistinguished soldier excluded from these brilliant eminences by the mere fact of his professional obscurity? "Doctor," or "clergyman," is conventionally held to be "synonymous with gentleman," until, in any individual case, the contrary is proved; but when Mrs. Kendal asserted that "actor" was, either conventionally or actually, synonymous with gentleman, she was speaking more in a minute than she could stand to in a month. In demolishing such a proposition, Mr. Burnand was breaking a butterfly on the wheel.

*Actor" not  
"synonymous  
with gentle-  
man."*

But, in refuting Mrs. Kendal, Mr. Burnand

not only defined the attitude of British respectability towards the stage, but justified it. Not as concerns men, be it understood ; he showed no reason why the stage should be regarded with suspicion as a career for men. For women, on the other hand, he demonstrated its deleteriousness, by showing that there was every likelihood of their being thrown into bad company and hearing bad language, while deprived of the protecting care of a chaperon. Only those to the manner born, the daughters of theatrical families, could entirely withstand the taint and pass through trial without deterioration. Now, whatever we may think of Mr. Burnand's conclusion (which amounts to the theory that no girl should be allowed to rub shoulders with the working-day world except under the care of a duenna), the fact from which he sets forth is obvious enough, and familiar to every one. A girl who goes on the stage will certainly hear things which she would not hear in her mother's drawing-room, and become familiar with facts which are not generally mentioned (though it does not follow that they are therefore unknown) in that domestic sanctuary. This is all that Mr. Burnand asserts, and, behold ! all Stageland is about his ears. Some deny the allegation indignantly or sarcastically ; some retort it upon the

*Mr. Burnand justifies the attitude of society,*

*and declares for duennas,*

*Stageland indignant.*

“society” which Mr. Burnand is supposed, for the nonce, to represent. “Think how charitable we are!” cry some; others adopt the defiant attitude of Mr. Gilbert’s Pirate King, and say, “I don’t think much of our profession, but contrasted with respectability it is comparatively honest!” Mr. Toole reproaches Mr. Burnand, with tears in his eyes, for libelling the calling to which he owes so much. Mr. Sydney Grundy, in the *Dramatic Review*, admits and glories in Mr. Burnand’s impeachment, proclaiming the delights of unconventional “good temper, good humour, cordiality, *camaraderie*, common sense, and charity” in the Bohemia of Stageland. Thus Mr. Burnand is encircled by a whole army of volunteer sharpshooters, who fire so wildly that their bullets pass over his head, and do damage only to the marksmen who happen to have taken an opposite point of view. The only shot which really penetrates his thick armour of truism is the query, “Whence this sudden enthusiasm for unpalatable plain-speaking? Why should you, of all men, insist upon dispelling these harmless illusions? Should one who, as a popular dramatist, has certainly done nothing to elevate the stage, be the first to proclaim its degradation?”

So far, the discussion has been confined

to points of small permanent importance, on which, if we only take the trouble to define our terms, rational difference of opinion is scarcely possible. It is quite certain that the British Philistine has, from of old, entertained a prejudice against all artistic pursuits whatsoever. We have but to read Thackeray to see how painting and literature were held in suspicion less than half a century ago; and that feeling, though moribund, is not yet dead. The prejudice against acting was intensified by Puritanism, but it, too, is going the way of all such ignorances. The precise point at which we have to-day arrived is aptly indicated by Mr. Hamilton Aïdé when he says (in his *Nineteenth Century* article on "The Actor's Calling"), "A sharper distinction is drawn, in thinking of the stage, between those who help to support and those who degrade and deform it." But the man or woman who has any real vocation towards the stage, or any other art, will be but little concerned as to the approval or disapproval of society. The arts (and acting not the least) will subsist and flourish when there is no "society," in the sense of a privileged, exclusive, and stupidly self-sufficient clique, to despise or patronize them. If progress and enlightenment bring with them an improvement in the morals

*Philistinism a  
foe to all the  
arts.*

*The prejudice  
is now  
disappearing.*

*The true artist  
unconcerned as  
to "society."*





*The day for  
duennas past,*

of the community, the morals of the stage will advance in equal degree; for the drama's patrons give the drama's moral as well as æsthetic laws, and the defilement of the stage comes not from within but from without. But even as matters stand at present, it is absurd to maintain that no virtuous woman, not to the manner born, can pass unsullied through the contaminations of Stageland. The day for duennas is past, and Englishwomen must prepare, and are preparing, to take the world as it comes, deliberately choosing the good, and resolutely refusing the evil, but no longer pluming themselves upon an artificial or affected ignorance of its existence. Mr. Burnand argues as though the Gaiety stage-door were the one portal to Stageland, and as if the novice could only by the rarest good fortune avoid passing her apprenticeship in figuring in pink fleshings and gabbling puns for the delectation of Messieurs the "mashers." This is not so. Gaiety burlesque and travelling opera-bouffe of the kind so ruthlessly depicted by Mr. George Moore in "A Mummer's Wife," are not the only nor even the easiest roads to the stage for a girl with any talent and education. But if they were, it is surely no more impossible for a lady to play in "three-act burlesque dramas," and remain a lady, than for

a gentleman to write, rehearse, and draw royalties from them, and yet remain a gentleman. A man of honour will scarcely feed his wife and daughters (if he have any) with money earned at the cost of necessary degradation to others of their sex.

*and contamination avoidable.*

I believe, then, that Mr. Burnand's statements as to matters of fact are so obvious as to amount to truisms, and yet that the conclusions which he draws from them need deter no one, man or woman, who has any talent for acting, from adopting the stage as a profession. But I hold that there are other considerations, untouched by Mr. Burnand, which should occur to the would-be actor and give him pause. Mr. Aïdé, in the article above quoted, alludes to them in passing, where he says that in Macready's life "we see the struggles and shortcomings of a high-minded man in a career which subsists from night to night on the stimulant of personal applause"; and Mrs. Lynn Linton, in an article in the *National Review*, goes very straight to the point in the remark that "to us, on the outside of things, it would seem that the worst to be said against the stage as a profession is the tremendous impulse it gives to vanity and egoism." Let us pursue the train of thought thus suggested, and consider the effect of acting,

*The true question.*

*—how does acting affect the actor's character?*

as an art, not upon the artist's morality (in the narrow sense of the word), but upon his or her self-respect, mental equipoise, and sense of human dignity.

*An ideal stage  
pre-supposed,*

To eliminate from the problem all temporary and non-essential factors, we must suppose an ideal stage. From such a stage, I take it, everything would be banished which tends to "debase the moral currency." It would give representations of life both real and ideal, both photographic and poetic. It would admit fun and frolic, but not inane irreverence towards all human ties and ideals. It would welcome humour, but not grossness, fantasy, but not buffoonery. No actor would be called upon to sing music-hall songs in dresses compared with which a clown's costume is sober and dignified; still less would he be required to flaunt about the stage in a travesty of female attire, a grinning insult to the other sex and shame to his own. No actress would be asked to devote her pretty ingenuousness and innocence of manner to giving additional piquancy to elaborately veiled double-meanings or cynically unveiled obscenities; nor would she be encouraged to rely for her popularity upon a peculiar talent for talking slang of the tap-room with intonations of the gutter. Such things are not

inevitable even on our actual stage; on an ideal stage they would be inconceivable. I do not wish to cast these degradations — into which, however, many men and women of talent have sunk, through which many of the greatest artists have passed—I do not wish to cast these temporary humiliations in the teeth of actors as a class. For the purposes of my argument I wish to conceive the art at its worthiest, as the interpreter of great literature, or at least of earnest thought, keen observation, and honest humour. I wish to imagine a theatre holding an honoured place in the intellectual life of a country, affording recreation of no ignoble cast to a wide and intelligent public, and then to ask whether the art which is thus, by our hypothesis, entirely beneficent to those who enjoy it, is equally beneficent to the artists who practise it?

*and the temporary humiliations of the actual stage disregarded.*

The torture-devisers of the Middle Ages had some ingenious expedients for driving their victims distraught, but one excellent device, better than the shrinking dungeon, better than "the pit and the pendulum," they do not seem to have hit upon. Suppose a man imprisoned in a narrow chamber, walled, roofed, and floored with mirrors, some plane, some concave, some convex, some warped in all conceivable

*"Self-consciousness torture,"*

ways, wherein every feature of his face, every motion of his limbs should be reflected and re-reflected, until his personality, in all sorts of disguises and contortions, should seem to fill all space and stretch away into infinitude. Whose sanity could stand such a strain? Who would not emerge with perceptions clouded and nerves unstrung from a course of this "self-consciousness torture," as it might be called?

*the actor's lot.*

It is the inevitable tendency of the actor's art to build round him such a mirror-cell.

*All artists  
slaves to  
Opinion.*

Mere opinion is, in the last analysis, the standard by which all art work must be judged. Rules and canons are but crystallizations of opinion, respectable, sometimes reverend, but still neither certain nor absolute. The inventor and the maker have absolute and certain standards of success, but not the imitator. A wheelwright makes a cart, and if he has put good material and honest workmanship in it, he knows that it is good. It is there to fulfil a certain purpose, and he has ocular and tangible proof that it fulfils that purpose. If any critic says it does not, he can be refuted by actual experiment. So with the man who invents an engine or a cannon. The engine is intended to drive certain machinery under certain conditions; the cannon to project a

*— not so the  
inventor or  
mechanic.*

ball a certain distance, and then pierce a certain thickness of armour-plate. If it does these things it is a success; if not, a failure, and the inventor must begin again. But set a man to imitate the cart or the cannon—much more a landscape or a human face—on a flat surface, by the aid of lines and colours, and at once opinion comes into play. Men will differ widely as to the mere correctness of the imitation, not to mention its artistic merits, and no single opinion can be absolutely proved or refuted. There may be a pretty general consensus among the men of one time and place, or even of many times and places; but Raphael himself did not satisfy Velasquez, does not enrapture Mr. Ruskin, and would probably be regarded in China as a person strangely ignorant of the first principles of design. The earliest and the latest anecdotes of art tell of the artist's subjection to the distracting influences of opinion, now obtusely presumptuous, now over-instructed. It is at once his glory and his misery to be always seeking to produce a certain effect upon the minds of his fellow-men. Only the rarest natures under the rarest circumstances can simply obey a native impulse or a divine prompting, and find perfect happiness in that obedience. Here and there a poet,

*The consensus  
never absolute.*

*The directly  
imitative arts  
specially  
subject to  
this influence.*

now and then a musician, may say, with a certain truth, that he does but sing because he must and pipes but as the linnet sings. In the more directly imitative arts this is well-nigh impossible. Fra Angelico no doubt painted for the glory of God, but he cannot have been quite indifferent to the praises of pope and prior. The true artist, the man of independent character, may be ever on his guard lest he be unduly puffed up or cast down by the winds of opinion; but this effort to preserve an even mind is of itself a departure from the stable equilibrium of perfect health. A humble and ardent devotion to nature, an intent and single-minded effort to read and interpret her secrets, may be a sufficient joy to the strongest souls; yet even to them appreciation is the breath of their nostrils; if it does not come to them in the present, they discount the praises of posterity. They cannot help it; for the success of any imitation depends ultimately on the consensus of men of ripe perceptions. A child who makes a circle and puts in it two dots and two dashes, considers this diagram a satisfactory imitation of his father's face; but the consensus of grown-up mankind is against that opinion. The unappreciated artist is as powerless as the child to prove that he is right and



the world wrong; he denies the ripeness of perception in his critics, and looks for justice from a clearer-seeing generation. He can bring forward no material, tangible evidence of his success; he cannot even fall back upon an absolute inward certainty like that of the thinker, who could say, "E pur si muove!" defiant of the opinion of all bygone generations, and heedless of the consent of those to come. "Who sweeps a floor as for God's laws" has the swept floor to show for his pains; who clears a patch of forest has his certificate of success in his homestead and his cornfields; who builds a lighthouse honestly knows that his light will shine in the darkness for, it may be, centuries to come, to testify that he has not laboured in vain; but he who paints a picture, or writes a play, has only the opinion of his contemporaries—opinion which, in its professional utterances, we call criticism—to assure him that he has not burdened the world with an irrelevant monstrosity.

*The un-  
appreciated  
artist powerless  
to prove himself  
in the right.*

The artist, therefore, cannot meet his fellow-men on entirely equal terms. He is always a candidate for their suffrages. He may treat them as defiantly as Coriolanus, as distantly as John Stuart Mill; he may refuse to pander to the ignoble vulgar, and content himself with

*The artist  
always a  
candidate for  
acceptance.*

audience fit, though few ; but he must submit himself to the acceptance of some given electorate, however high the franchise-qualification. The artisan can calmly subject his work to the criticism of Nature herself ; if his wall is well built it endures, if ill built it cracks and crumbles ; but the artist must lay his case before the court of Opinion with a dubious and unfruitful appeal to the supreme tribunal of Time.

*Hence the foibles of the "irritable race."*

Hence the great drawbacks of that otherwise priceless gift, the artistic temperament—the self-consciousness, the tendency to undue elation and despondency, the jealousies and partizanships, the eager egoism, sometimes soaring into egregious vanity, against which even the greatest artists must be ever on their guard. In most of the arts men may, by a constant course of tonics and febrifuges, counteract the influence of these miasmas ; but there is one art whose whole atmosphere is so impregnated with them, that no specific yet discovered can afford entire immunity from their noxious effects.

*which especially beset actors.*

That art is acting.

*The actor's material—his own body.*

Consider its conditions, as compared with those of the other arts. The painter and sculptor are indifferent to the materials in

which they work ; the actor's canvas and clay are his own face, figure, and voice, matters closely affecting his natural self-love. Most of us, after a certain age, come to take our physical perfections or defects as things of course, and are not deeply concerned as to the cut of the fleshly vesture wherein we are clothed ; to the actor it is of supreme importance, and, consequently, the first effect of his calling is to make him vividly and persistently conscious of his personal appearance. That this is an unhealthy and undesirable state of mind no one will deny.

What painter would like to place his easel in full view of a theatre, dense with all sorts and conditions of men, and then and there paint his picture, listening eagerly at every touch for the approval or dissent of the onlookers. That is the lot of the actor. The oblivion of criticism, the absorption in art for art's sake, which other artists may enjoy during their hours of actual production, are beyond the reach of the mime. He may for a moment be carried away in the rapture of passion (it is hard to hold with Diderot that this is a mark of second-rate art) ; but to say that he ever "forgets the audience" is to use a mere figure of speech. His previous study and rehearsal are doubtless

*His studio—  
the theatre.*

of vast importance, but they are merely the stretching of the canvas and arranging of the pigments; the actual work of art begins and ends while the curtain is up, stands or falls according to the immediate impression it produces upon some hundreds or thousands of persons more or less ill-qualified to appraise it justly. Are these desirable conditions for the production of worthy work? The painter who paints in colours more evanescent than the rainbow, for the immediate delectation of audiences which may be "few" but can scarcely be altogether "fit," must surely be a prey to unhealthy excitement, over-stimulation, violent reaction—in short, to fifty influences which tend to disturb the even course of personal consciousness, wherein consists the highest good.

*Mistakes and  
masterpieces  
exhibited alike.*

The actor's mistakes, as well as his masterpieces, must all be submitted to the public. The painter does not place his spoiled canvases on exhibition, nor the sculptor his abortive modellings; but the actor, even the great actor, must sometimes have the chagrin of feeling that a new part is an elaborate mistake, or that, from illness or other temporary disturbance, he is failing to do himself justice in an old and formerly successful character. True,

he will very likely find his mistakes as much applauded as his achievements, but that, to a conscientious artist, must be a doubtful consolation.

It is an old commonplace, but nevertheless a truth of very serious import, that the actor is denied that appeal to the tribunal of Time in which other artists find a refuge from the tyranny of temporary Opinion. The fact that his works do not survive him, so often insisted upon as a pathetic element in his lot, has certainly its compensations. He cannot become an incubus upon future generations. The "old masters" of acting are but names, not objects of enervating idolatry to the few, of ignorant scorn or insincere admiration to the many. "All this," as Juliet says, "is comfort"; yet his thralldom to the impressions of the hour is a grave misfortune to the actor. Other artists, if they can afford to labour and to wait, may hope to educate their public; but it is his public which educates the actor. "The drama's laws the drama's patrons give," is not absolutely true of the drama as a literary product; but let us say, "The actor's laws the actor's patrons give," and our position is unassailable. That "those who live to please must please to live," is true not only in an

*No appeal  
from immediate  
Opinion.*

*His public  
educates the  
actor,*

economic but in an artistic sense. Immediate applause is as necessary to the artistic existence of the actor as a regular salary to his physical existence. A painter may paint, a poet may sing, in accordance with his own ideal, finding personal satisfaction in the mere exercise of his powers, and trusting that in the fulness of time his work will meet with the appreciation it deserves. To the actor no such devotion to an ideal is possible. He takes little or no pleasure in the mere exercise of his powers, apart from the attention and applause of the theatre. "Actor" and "audience" are strictly correlative terms, like father and child, or husband and wife. We do not hear of Hamlets, rejected by the mob, seeking solace in giving ideal performances to the sad sea waves, or if we do hear of such enthusiasts we doubt their sanity; but no one doubts the sanity of a painter who prefers poverty to "pot-boilers," or of a poet who keeps his lyric raptures in manuscript. Popular applause, in short, is not only the bread in the actor's mouth, but the very breath of his nostrils. He must seek it at all hazards, purchase it by all concessions. Not only can he not work for posterity, he cannot even work for his own pleasure and approval. Are these desirable conditions for the exercise of an art?

*and its  
applause is  
the breath of  
his nostrils.*



Or can an art thus conditioned afford a congenial career for a man of independent mind?

Another very important effect of the perpetual publicity of acting and its subjection to immediate and noisy criticism, is the multiplication and embitterment of the jealousies from which no artistic society is quite free. Painters, sculptors, novelists, may work side by side without having odious comparisons forced upon them at every turn of their lives. They stand on an equal footing, and have even chances of distinction. If one commands higher prices and more enthusiastic criticisms than another, his success does not appreciably diminish the chances of his fellows. In acting, the grades of distinction are unmistakably marked. Every one cannot play leading parts, and the man whom the public accepts as Hamlet and Romeo is evidently more distinguished than he who has to content himself with Laertes and Tybalt. The success of one man stops the way for others, temporarily, if not absolutely. In the other arts the positions of eminence are not peaks, but plateaus, with room for every one who has the strength to attain them; the high places of Stageland are pinnacles where only one can find footing at a time, and possession is nine points of the law. Any painter has the opportunity, if he have the

*Jealousies and envyings.*

*The successful actor stops the way for others.*



*Comparative  
success and  
failure forced  
on the actor's  
notice.*

power, to paint as well as Mr. Watts; there may be actors with the power to act as well as Mr. Irving, but from the simple fact that he is there before them, they are debarred the opportunity. They cannot appear, they cannot even efficiently rehearse and exercise themselves, in the great parts wherein their talent could find elbow-room. Further, the comparative success or failure of actors is constantly being forced upon their notice by the applause of the theatre and the judgments of the press. Would it not embitter and envenom the jealousies of painters if they had to make a nightly exhibition of their works, and listen to the remarks of the public, besides reading invidiously comparative criticisms of them in a hundred papers? The actor has to go through twenty times as much newspaper criticism as any other artist, and it is significant of the habit of mind engendered by his art that he is twenty times as careful as any other artist to read and treasure all his "notices." The tradition, in fine, which attributes to actors a peculiar tendency to envious egoism is justified by the facts; and though, with the widening of the field of effort, this tendency may of late have lost something of its strength, it is inherent in the very nature of the actor's art, and can never be entirely suppressed.

Let me briefly recapitulate the articles of this indictment, not against actors, many of whom struggle bravely against the difficulties which their art throws in their way, but against the art itself which throws these difficulties. (1) It fosters a morbid physical self-consciousness. (2) It leaves no room for what has been called the somnambulism of genius. "The artist," says one of Henry James's characters, "performs great feats in a dream. We must not wake him up lest he should lose his balance." But the actor never falls asleep: he is kept eagerly awake either by applause or by the expectation of it. (3) It does not allow the artist to distinguish his mistakes from his masterpieces until they have actually been exhibited to the public. (4) It admits of no appeal from the verdict of temporary opinion; or, in other words, its very existence is dependent on a certain amount, at least, of immediate popular favour. (5) It raises to the third power that tendency to egoistic jealousy which besets all the arts. On all these counts, it seems to me, acting, not as it exists in one place or at one time, but in its very nature and essence, stands condemned to exclusion from the list of callings in which a man of self-respecting independence of mind, a man who, in Whitman's phrase, is

*Recapitulation.*

desirous to "dismiss whatever insults his own soul," would willingly engage.

*Minor  
drawbacks.*

Minor drawbacks, not a few, may be alleged against acting. Charles Lamb has sufficiently demonstrated its low position in the hierarchy of the arts, and proved that it cannot be said in any sense to create, but merely to interpret the creations of others. To use an illustration which Lamb's unmusical soul would perhaps reject as not forcible enough, the greatest actor is a mere executant, a virtuoso, and Garrick himself stands to Shakespeare in the relation of Bülow to Beethoven. The necessity for travesty, the person, sometimes in grotesque and humiliating forms (for these occur even in the highest drama) is surely a disadvantage, though perhaps a minor one. Molière dying in harness lest those dependent on him should suffer, forms one of the most pathetic spectacles in history; yet most of us would prefer to die in other "harness" than the rouge of Argan. The egoism and jealousy, again, which acting tends to foster, have their converse and complement in the habitual insincerity necessary to grease the wheels of social life in Stageland. Suppose any given theatre turned suddenly into a Palace of Truth, and all the members of the company forced to state their true opinion of each other's

*Necessity for  
"dressing up."*

*Insincerity  
of social  
intercourse.*

performances—the Palace of Truth would be a Pandemonium. No doubt the same tendency to insincerity pervades artistic society, but in Stageland it is intensified by the fact that actors are perpetually thrown together and work under each other's eyes, so that they cannot easily take refuge in a decent reticence. In all these considerations, to conclude, I have tacitly presupposed that the actor has a certain talent, if not an absolute genius, for his art. The degraded and pitiable condition of a mummer who has mistaken his vocation is quite self-evident.

It is not my purpose here to discuss the compensations of the actor's career. They are so numerous, and to some minds so overwhelming, that there will probably always be a supply of aspirants to the stage, at least equal to the demand. Some strenuous souls will struggle against the drawbacks I have enumerated; others, no doubt, will content themselves with the "public manners" bred by "public means," and will philosophically let their nature be subdued "to what it works in, like the dyer's hand." Not the least ingenious essay of the ingenious author of "Obiter Dicta" is that in which he sets out to prove that the actor's calling is not "an eminently worthy one"; but

*Compensations:  
Devotion of  
actors to the  
stage.*

*Apparent  
exceptions :  
Shakespeare.*

he makes a mistake in attempting to range the testimony of actors themselves on his side. Shakespeare's evidence, on which he greatly relies, does not go for much. Even if we take the two often-quoted sonnets as utterances of personal feeling, it is at best the feeling of a man by no means indifferent to worldly station at a period when the stage was in great disrepute, when its morals were low and its manners coarse, nay, in the very reign when unlicensed players were declared by statute to be rogues and vagabonds. We must read Sonnets CX. and CXI. in the light of the subsequently-purchased armorial bearings, and of the poet's clearly-proved desire to figure as a country magnate, "spacious in the possession of dirt." Macready, again (with the exception of Fanny Kemble, almost the only English actor who seriously reviles his profession), was a man who would have made himself unhappy in any walk of life. Mr. Birrell calls him the King Arthur of the stage ; but the comparison, however just as to morals, is a libel upon the temper of the blameless king. Even Macready was at heart devoted to the stage ; it was in reality its social disabilities which galled and irritated him. All other actors whose memoirs are known to me, though they may indulge in occasional ebullitions

*Macready.*

of impatience against their daily work, just as did the husbandman and the lawyer in the days of Horace, can be seen to be, in fact, absorbed in it heart and soul. The truth is, that the stage has a strange fascination for its—dare I say victims?—such as few other callings possess. Every one who has any personal acquaintance with actors will corroborate this assertion. They are for the most part careless or unconscious of its ethical drawbacks, and are subject at worst to fits of rebellion against its physical discomforts, the precariousness of the employment it affords, the partiality of managers, the density of the public, the malice of the critics. When they have an “off night,” they rush to the theatre to see others act. Mr. Birrell knows little of actors if he thinks he can get the fairly successful among them, in their normal moods, to rise up in judgment against their profession.

It is certain, then, that so long as the dramatic and mimetic instincts in human nature remain as they are, the stage will never lack its devotees. Nor am I arguing that they should be held in low esteem. On the contrary, it seems to me that in a well-ordered society, those who sacrifice themselves and incur moral or physical risk or discomfort for the greater

*No real and  
indubitable  
exception on  
record.*

*The chief  
compensation :  
Acting an  
altruistic art.*

good of the greater number, should have a right to special rewards and peculiar consideration. Among such I would include doctors, scavengers, soldiers (from the field-marshal to the private), sailors (from the lord high admiral to the cabin-boy), coal-miners, policemen, theatrical critics—and actors.



## SHAKESPEARE AND THE PUBLIC. <sup>1</sup>

IF, as some believe, the salvation of the English stage is to be found in Shakespeare, we should now be in a state approaching beatitude. He is, unquestionably, the popular dramatist of the day. What other playwright can boast of two five-act plays running simultaneously at the two leading theatres of London? <sup>2</sup> What other playwright is studied so scrupulously or mounted so sumptuously? If he now "spells ruin" to any one, it is not to the managers who act him,

*Shakespeare  
the popular  
dramatist of  
the day.*

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<sup>1</sup> Written in December, 1884. At the present moment (March, 1886), the Shakespearean repertory is having a rest, but several revivals are looming ahead at the Lyceum, "Othello" is promised (or threatened) at the Princess's, and the return of Miss Mary Anderson from America will doubtless be signalized by a production of "As You Like It." Therefore I think it unnecessary to modify my remarks on the superficial popularity of the poet, while the fundamental ignorance of his works, dwelt on in the sequel, is certainly unchanged.

<sup>2</sup> "Hamlet" at the Princess's, and "Romeo and Juliet" at the Lyceum.

*The chief  
competitor of  
the modern  
playwright,*

but to the modern dramatists who have to compete with him. He is once more, as poor Robert Greene spitefully called him in 1592, "an absolute Johannes factotum," and in the managers' "conceyt, the only Shake-scene in a countrey." The purveyors of mere melodrama have still a chance, though now that Shakespeare's scenery, too, is found capable of running upon wheels, even that chance seems precarious; and as for such playwrights as Mr. Merivale and Mr. Wills, whose special gift, as Greene puts it, is to "bombast out a blank verse," they find themselves everywhere pigeon-holed, and bidden to bide a turn which is often very long of coming. The injury is perhaps more apparent than real. Blank verse, if it is to suit the modern palate, must have the aroma of antiquity. As produced in these days, it is felt to be an artificial and somewhat flat concoction, and it is far from certain that, if the Shakespearean tap were suddenly to dry up, the public would evince an equally insatiable thirst for the modern imitation. Shakespeare has probably done yeoman's service, even to the dramatists of to-day, by playing the mediator, as it were, between society and the stage. The present theatrical revival undoubtedly dates from Mr. Irving's historic performance of "Hamlet," by

*and the chief  
mediator  
between society  
and the stage.*

which the stage was magnified and made fashionable. It was that performance, and its successors, which induced in the world of letters, art, and fashion, the habit of theatre-going, so that the Lyceum now ranks with the Grosvenor Gallery, the Princess's with the popular concerts, among the statutory topics of conversation at every well-regulated æsthetic tea. For this change we have to thank Shakespeare.

A change, no doubt, on the whole beneficent, yet not to be rejoiced in without certain misgivings—a change for the better, but scarcely for the best. That Shakespeare should be popular in his native land is just and right; but is he popular with an understanding, discriminating, abiding popularity, or only with a temporary, unreasoning vogue? That his vogue is temporary I should be sorry to think; but I fear there is no shirking the fact that it is, as yet, in the main unreasoning. *His vogue unreasoning.*

The past year witnessed three great Shakespearean revivals, "Twelfth Night" and "Romeo and Juliet" at the Lyceum, "Hamlet" at the Princess's. Each outbade the other in costliness and carefulness; each drew its audiences, and evoked its share of comment and applause. Yet when we inquire into the *The revivals of 1884.*

*Mounting  
magnificent  
acting  
mediocre.*

net gain to dramatic art from all this outlay of capital and energy, it seems pitifully small. Two plays, which every one knows by heart, have been played in novel costumes; one play, not so well known, has been placed on the stage in a manner which went far to obscure its beauties. The whole three productions showed us only one piece of perfect acting — Mrs. Stirling's Nurse. Miss Terry's Viola was very charming, Miss Anderson's Juliet was, in many ways, a memorable performance, but one in which even its warmest panegyrist, Lord Lytton, was constrained to admit grave defects. Mr. Irving's Malvolio showed less than his usual intelligence. Mr. Wilson Barrett's Hamlet showed plenty of intelligence, but too little of the other qualities indispensable to a great Shakespearean actor. For the rest, not a single performer in the three plays rose above mediocrity, while many sank far below it. We are forced, then, to conclude that the public has not sufficient appreciation of Shakespeare to be disturbed by misrepresentations of his work, and that, intent on the spectacle, they regard the acting with eyes unobservant and ears unsensitive.

I am not sneering at the miracles of modern mounting and stage-management. They are

the result of an inevitable tendency, and are good in their way. As the dramatic stage learned from the lyric stage the secrets of movable scenery and mechanism, so the poetic drama is now borrowing from melodrama and pantomime the methods of realism and spectacle. We are, for the moment, overdoing it, indulging in expense for its own sake, and subordinating artistic effect to mere ostentation ; but that is an excess which will correct itself. We cannot go back to the old days of conventional and ludicrously inappropriate scenery, raw "supers," and haphazard stage-management. Edwin Booth, and still more Salvini, have proved that not even genius can make us forget, though it may for the moment force us to forgive, these irritating deficiencies. If Shakespeare, as some critics hold, is necessarily distorted and obscured by appropriate, and even richly appropriate, methods of decoration, why, so much the worse for Shakespeare. But this is not the case. When the first fever of sartorial splendour and archæological pedantry passes away, we shall doubtless arrive at a happy mean of illustrative decoration. If Shakespeare presents some difficulties which no scenic devices can quite overcome—as in his fairy scenes and battle scenes—the great majority of the pictures he suggests

*Scenic  
illustrates an  
irresistible  
tendency.*

*Appropriate-  
ness always  
indispensable,  
splendour  
permissible on  
occasion.*

are such as, with our modern resources, we can easily realize. That the public should take a vivid interest and delight in such realizations, even if a little too ostentatious, is neither to be wondered at nor to be deplored. What is to be deplored, though not to be wondered at, is that it should be content to see so little of Shakespeare, and that little so imperfectly acted.

*Only one  
corner of  
Shakespeare  
known to  
the public.*

"So little of Shakespeare!" the reader may exclaim. "Have you not just been pointing out that Shakespeare is the most popular dramatist of the day?" I admit my mistake—I should have said that two or three plays of Shakespeare are used as a groundwork for the most popular entertainments of the day. The received Shakespearean canon includes some three dozen plays. Of these our great Shakespearean manager, Mr. Irving, has given us eight in ten years: "Hamlet," "Macbeth," "Othello," "Richard III.," "Merchant of Venice," "Romeo and Juliet," "Much Ado about Nothing," and "Twelfth Night." Another actor aspires to legitimate renown; surely he will seek it by literally "reviving" some play which has lain too long in cold obstruction. Nay, he has vowed a vow, and we shall have nothing but "Hamlet." An American actress wishes to put a crown to her popular achieve-

ments, and a few more months of "Romeo and Juliet" are the inevitable result. It is quite natural that Mr. Wilson Barrett should choose what has come to be regarded as the diploma-piece of the legitimate actor, and that Miss Mary Anderson should essay the part which, of all others, offers the greatest temptations to youth, beauty, and talent; but the fact remains that the theatrical public of the day knows only one corner, so to speak, of Shakespeare's genius—far less than was known to the unsophisticated frequenters of Sadler's Wells twenty-five years ago.

And this corner it knows superficially, unlovingly, unappreciatively. It is, of course, neither to be expected nor desired that the great public should be learned in editions and readings, though they might have enough rough-and-ready criticism to reject the meaningless misprints of the first folio when pedantically presented as improvements on the received text. What is much to be desired is that they should, for example, have some conception of the value and beauty of Shakespearean verse. Without this how can any one have more than the faintest glimmering of the true beauty of such a poem as "Romeo and Juliet"? Yet it is probably no exaggeration to say that out of

*and that  
superficially.*



*Prosody a  
dead letter.*

an average audience not one man in a hundred is in the least put about when an actor mangles every third line he speaks. Our ears have lost the habit of following the poet's numbers, and we are content to have exquisite poetry spoken as bad prose. Lord Lytton scarcely goes too far when he calls the speaking of blank verse

*Mr. Irving.*

"a lost art." It is to be said to Mr. Irving's credit, that he usually secures commonplace correctness in his productions—insists, that is to say, that a ten-syllable line shall contain ten syllables, and not eight or twelve according to the whim of the actor. But not even he has any conception of the art of musical delivery, while Miss Terry chants her verses with an emphasis on every monosyllable, reminding one of Churchill's lines about Moody:—

*Miss Terry.*

"Conjunction, preposition, adverb, join  
To stamp new vigour on the nervous line ;  
In monosyllables his thunders roll,  
He, she, it, and, we, ye, they, fright the soul."

*Miss Anderson.*

Miss Anderson, as a rule, comes as near a just delivery of English decasyllabics as any one on the stage, and I conclude from Lord Lytton's criticism of her Juliet that she must have corrected one or two defects into which the nervousness of the first night no doubt betrayed her; but her supporters played such pranks

with Shakespeare's prosody as might have tortured the least sensitive ear, yet did not in the least disturb the equanimity either of the audience or of the critics. This insistence on syllables and quantities may seem petty, but in the sphere of poetry the aphorism *de minimis non curat lex* has no application; and even if the matter were smaller in itself, it would still be significant of much. An audience which can tolerate a false note in every second phrase of the Moonlight Sonata cannot be either intelligently familiar with it beforehand or sensitively alive to its influence as it proceeds.

The fact is—and here we come to the root of the matter—both the representation and the appreciation of Shakespeare require an apprenticeship which, in the present phase of theatrical life, neither actors nor audiences have any opportunity of going through. We may or may not regret the “palmy days” of the drama, but it is certain that the abolition of the patent theatres marked the abolition, for a time at least, of those conditions which alone could keep Shakespeare healthily alive on the stage. What, then, were those conditions? In the first place, an infinitely narrower, or rather more concentrated public, a public habituated to the theatre in the sense that it knew every

*Two essentials  
of a Shake-  
spearean  
theatre.*

*A trained  
public,*

*and trained  
actor.*

actor in the company and every play in the repertory, yet not rendered callous and captious by the inordinate amount of theatre-going which he must endure who would keep pace with the drama of to-day; and, in the second place, bodies of actors accustomed to play together, trained, not in long runs of farce and melodrama, but in rapid alternations of parts, principally poetic, and, in short, acclimatized from their noviciate onwards to a high Shakespearean atmosphere, instead of being snatched up to it, breathless and bewildered, on the wings of a "special engagement."

*Charles Lamb  
a typical  
Shakespearean  
playgoer.*

Charles Lamb may be taken as a typical playgoer of the palmy days—not, certainly, an average playgoer, but one who possessed in the highest perfection the knowledge and enthusiasm which hundreds of others shared in a minor degree. His whole mind had been given to the study of a certain school, or rather of two schools, of dramatic writing—the poetic drama of the Elizabethans, and the post-Restoration comedy. All his theatrical experience had tended to familiarize him with the methods of acting appropriate to these two schools. He knew the classic repertory scene by scene and speech by speech. A misplaced emphasis jarred on his ear like a squeaking slate-pencil,

much more a misinterpreted scene, a misconceived character. Hear the beginning of his exquisite paper "On Some of the Old Actors," written in 1822—a passage from which, making all possible allowance for illusions of memory, we learn that the decadence had then already set in. "The casual sight of an old Play Bill," he says, "which I picked up the other day—I know not by what chance it was preserved so long—tempts me to call to mind a few of the Players who make the principal figure in it. It presents the cast of parts in the 'Twelfth Night,' at the old Drury Lane Theatre two-and-thirty years ago. There is something very touching in these old remembrances. They make us think how we *once* used to read a Play Bill—not, as now peradventure, singling out a favourite performer, and casting a negligent eye over the rest; but spelling out every name, down to the very mutes and servants of the scene; when it was a matter of no small moment to us whether Whitfield, or Packer, took the part of Fabian; when Benson, and Burton, and Phillimore—names of small account—had an importance beyond what we can be content to attribute now to the time's best actors. 'Orsino, by Mr. Barrymore.' What a full Shakespearean sound it carries! how fresh

*"Some of the  
Old Actors."*

*"Twelfth  
Night" at  
Drury Lane,  
1790.*

*"A full  
Shakespearean  
sound,"*

to memory arise the image and the manner of the gentle actor!" Will "Orsino, Mr. Terriss," carry a full Shakespearean sound to the ear of any man now living should he chance, thirty years hence, upon one of the elegant Lyceum programmes of to-day? Will any one in 1914 celebrate the praises of "Malvolio, Mr. Henry Irving," with the rapturous gratitude wherewith Lamb descants on Bensley's performance of the part? Mr. Irving, no doubt, will have his panegyrists thirty years hence, though they will scarcely single out his Malvolio to dwell upon; but it may be doubted whether one in a thousand of the Lyceum spectators can even faintly conceive the nature of those subtle reminiscences of keen intellectual pleasure conveyed to Lamb's mind by the full Shakespearean sound of "Orsino, by Mr. Barrymore." The playgoers of to-day do not sufficiently understand and love the poet of "Twelfth Night," to know what Lamb meant by a "full Shakespearean sound." I am inclined to think that more of the genuine enthusiasm survives in the provinces than in London; at least, I have often noticed in provincial audiences that alertness of appreciation which Mr. Edwin Booth describes as a characteristic of the American public, and the lack of which in London he

*for which the  
playgoers of  
to-day have  
no ear.*

deplored. It is not many years since the old Haymarket company, and one or two other excellent combinations, were still giving admirable performances of the classic drama (Shakespeare, Goldsmith, Sheridan, &c.) in the provinces. Whoever has seen Compton as Touchstone and Chippendale as Adam, has seen the perfection of Shakespearean comedy, almost rivalled, indeed, by the same two actors' performance of the Gravedigger and Polonius, which must be remembered by many London playgoers. It is noteworthy, by the way, that the one scene in the late revival of "Much Ado about Nothing" which was played with really memorable excellence, was the quarrel of Leonato and Antonio with Don Pedro and Claudio, into which Mr. Howe, last remnant of the old Haymarket, managed, by his admirable performance of Antonio, to breathe a spark of the genuine Shakespearean spirit.

*The old  
Haymarket  
company.*

The audiences of Lamb's day were, of course, not all Lambs; but there were so many who shared his enthusiasm, and in part his knowledge, that they might be trusted to leaven the mass and infuse into any average audience a spirit of soundly critical appreciation. Lamb, we may be sure, was not alone in his care as to

*The training  
of the  
eighteenth  
century public*

*quite in-  
accessible to us.*

“whether Whitfield or Packer took the part of Fabian;” how many playgoers of to-day know who is playing Horatio at the Princess’s, or even Mercutio at the Lyceum? Of those who know, how many have taken the trouble to consider whether the part is well or ill-played? And of those who have taken so much pains, how many have the knowledge required to form a valid opinion? Most of us can tell a good Bob Briarley or Sam Gerridge when we see him, for we have but to compare the copy with the type as known to us in real life; but which of us has known Mercutio, a creature of another world than ours, speaking, moving, and thinking according to laws remote from our experience? Not one of us can really have studied and mastered these laws as did the audiences of a century ago, of whose theatrical life at least one-half was passed in an atmosphere of poetic, or would-be poetic, idealism. The dullest tragedy of the veriest Grub Street poetaster afforded better training in the technique of Shakespearean drama than our generation can receive from “Fédora” or “The Silver King;” but Shakespeare was the great professor in his own school, and by constantly listening to his numbers men acquired a true ear for their melody. I take down at haphazard a volume



of Genest, and, opening it at its first page, find that in the season 1777-78 the following fourteen plays of Shakespeare were performed at Drury Lane:—"Hamlet," "Richard III.," "Merchant of Venice," "Henry IV." (parts I. and II.), "Measure for Measure," "King John," "Twelfth Night," "Macbeth," "Much Ado about Nothing," "Cymbeline," "Merry Wives of Windsor," "Tempest," and "Romeo and Juliet." Covent Garden in the same season presented "Romeo and Juliet," "King Lear," "Much Ado about Nothing," "Merchant of Venice," "Othello," "Richard III.," "As You Like it," "Macbeth," and "Henry V." Thus half the works of Shakespeare were performed in that one season, and any playgoer who attended half the Shakespearean first-nights saw more of the poet's works than he who has attended all the Shakespearean first-nights at the Lyceum for the past ten years. Must not the public of that day have stood to Shakespeare in a relation ten times more intimate and sympathetic than can be brought about by all our "sumptuous and scholarly" revivals?

*Shakespeare at  
Drury Lane  
and Covent  
Garden in  
1777-8.*

I am not regretting the patent theatres, any more than I regret the Globe and Fortune of Burbage and Alleyn. The system had its merits in its day, but in this vast London, and

*Profit and loss.*

in our era of free competition, it would be at once anachronistic and impossible. We have gained, in my opinion, infinitely more than we have lost by the abolition of theatrical monopolies. But there has nevertheless been a distinct and sensible loss, mainly in the decline of the true Shakespearean spirit among actors and audiences.

*From homogeneity to heterogeneity.*

A century ago, and less, the theatrical world was comparatively homogeneous. There were two or three theatres, presenting to their well-accustomed audiences two or three well-defined forms of dramatic art—tragedy or poetic melodrama, comedy and farce. Now our heterogeneous public is distracted between some thirty theatres which present the most heterogeneous bills of fare : tragedy, poetic melodrama, sensation drama, domestic drama, comedy (French and English), farce (French and English), comedy-drama, vaudeville, burlesque, extravaganza, opera-bouffe, &c. What wonder that actors who generally make the round of all these forms should fail to master the principles of one very difficult phase of their art, in which they can have, at the best, only a very narrow experience ! What wonder that the public, with its attention frittered away between the melody of Offenbach, the humour of Byron, and

the pathos of Sardou, should fail to acquire a sensitive taste for the melody, the humour, and the pathos of Shakespeare !

But the transition from homogeneity to heterogeneity is the recognized process of evolution. At present we are in a state of chaos, or slowly emerging therefrom. As time goes on, a new order will replace the old, and then, perhaps, Shakespeare will again find a sympathetic public—not the whole theatrical public, as of old, but a special public large enough to support a special school of acting.

*The process of evolution.*

Surely it is not impossible that we should one day possess a theatre in which not Shakespeare alone, but several of his great contemporaries, may afford a certain steady proportion, at least, of the staple entertainment ; in which all his plays which are by any means actable may stand upon the permanent repertory, ready to be revived, with careful and appropriate though not sumptuous appointments, at a few weeks' notice ; in which no unbroken runs shall be tolerated, even the most attractive production being (as at the Français) repeated not more than three or four times a week ; in which a certain number of the company shall undergo an adequate apprenticeship in poetico-romantic acting ; and, finally, in which some sacrifice of

*A Shakespearean theatre,*

*possible or  
impossible?*

immediate pecuniary profit to an artistic ideal may not be altogether out of the question. Such a theatre, were it possible, would quickly educate its public, and that no scanty one. It should carry out on a vastly greater scale what Mr. Phelps attempted so bravely in his semi-provincial corner at Clerkenwell. No private capitalist, it is clear, and least of all a modern actor-manager, is likely to make any effort of the kind; but is it inconceivable that some larger or smaller confraternity of wealthy art-lovers might one day find in the first place pleasure, in the second place a moderate profit, in organizing such an institution? In the following essay I have attempted an answer to this question.

## THE STAGE OF GREATER BRITAIN.

THE theatrical life of to-day throughout the Anglo-Saxon world may be described as an incessant round of splendid strolling. The player has ceased to be a rogue, but he remains a vagabond. In the days of Elizabeth the servants of this or that nobleman prowled about the country, from market-town to market-town, humbly soliciting the sufferance of the authorities, and grateful if Bumble spared them the stocks and sent them on their way with a largesse of a few shillings. Now the distinguished actor travels with a retinue Leicester himself might envy, and civic dignitaries feel honoured by his condescending notice. There have been many intermediate stages between these two extremes. In the theatrical memoirs of last century we read of the provincial "circuits" or groups of country towns, each catered for by one manager, who was obliged every now and then to pay toll of his best talents to the

*Splendid  
strolling the  
order of the day.*

*The provincial  
"circuits."*

*The star  
system.*

*The "combina-  
tion" system.*

great patent theatres in the capital. Then came the star system, not quite extinct to this day. Each country town had its "stock company," including within itself the forces requisite for every theatrical enterprise from "Hamlet" to the Christmas pantomime, but also prepared to "support" the stars who, from time to time, rose in solitary splendour over the local horizon. To this system all our older artists owe their training; indeed, it subsisted in almost undiminished vigour until within the last ten or fifteen years. Several causes combined to destroy it, and supply its place with the present "combination" system. Foremost among these was the growing demand for scenic sensation and realism of externals, seconded by the healthier taste for adequate presentation of minor parts, good stage management, and careful playing-together. Increased rapidity of transit, the facilities for centralization afforded by the telegraph, even such apparent trifles as the introduction of elaborate picture-posters—these and many other causes contributed to the destruction of the good old stock companies. In theatrical speculation, in short, as in all other branches of commercial enterprise, the tendency towards concentration has proved irresistible. The modern impresario plays for

such high stakes, and on such a vast scale, as would have made his predecessor of twenty-five years ago stand aghast.

Under the star system, an actor in serving his apprenticeship played many parts in one place; on the present combination plan he plays one part in many places. Mr. Henry Irving, as we learn from Mr. Austin Brereton's careful biography, has played the astonishing number of 649 parts, and of these the round 600 certainly belong to the period of his novitiate. Had he gone on the stage some twenty years later, his provincial experience would have consisted of two or three characters a year, played under the supervision of a despotic stage manager, in servile imitation of the actors who "created" the parts in London. The former method of training was not perfect, but it gave play to natural selection and the survival of the fittest; the latter method fosters mechanical mimicry at the expense of original and creative talent. In this lies one serious danger for the future of the stage.

*Stars v.  
constellations.*

There is scarcely an actor of to-day who could not write an itinerary of the United Kingdom as minute as Barnabee's if not quite as lively. But the universal strolling is not confined to the United Kingdom. A perpetual

*The actor a  
globe-trotter.*



circulation of theatrical talent is rapidly establishing itself throughout the English-speaking globe. To a modern actor a tour round the world is a less formidable affair than a tour round the Bristol, York, or Edinburgh circuit was to his grandfather. It is more comfortable and less adventurous. He is as much at home in San Francisco as in Liverpool. He is, in the full sense of the words, a citizen of Greater Britain. Expanded England is rapidly becoming, so far as the theatre is concerned, one great Republic.

*and expanded  
England a  
theatrical  
Republic.*

*America's  
contributions  
to the common  
stock.*

To this commonwealth of art America contributes almost as much as she receives. She has for long held her own in the matter of actors. Against Kean and Macready she could set off Forrest and Charlotte Cushman, comparable, if not equal, in genius; if we sent her Sothorn, she gave back in Jefferson more than she got. She has until recently imported much more theatrical art than she has exported, but the difference has been in quantity rather than quality. Now the balance is rapidly becoming even in both respects. The theatrical talent of the two countries is being, so to speak, shuffled and equally dealt between them. This is true of the actors, and it is rapidly becoming true of the plays as well.

Some of the best work in more than one line which the modern English drama can show has been done in America, and her contributions to the stage-literature of Greater Britain are almost certain to go on increasing in quantity and improving in quality. Our market, both for players and plays, is thus widened enormously, while at the same time a novel element of competition is introduced. What will be the effect of these new conditions upon our stage? And how can we best take advantage of our new opportunities?

*The market widened, but competition increased.*

London remains for the present the theatrical capital of Greater Britain. The verdict of London has an authority in New York which the verdict of New York cannot claim in London. American actors are content to carry home laurels from England. If they can harvest sovereigns too, so much the better; but they do not consider their time misspent if the glory is greater than the gain. English actors, going to America, think more of the gain than the glory. Their laurel-wreaths must be of gold, or they care little for them. The first appearance of Mr. Irving or Mrs. Langtry is a much greater event in New York than the first appearance of Mr. Edwin Booth or Miss Mary Anderson in London. The

*London still the theatrical capital of Greater Britain.*

*New York  
defers to  
London more  
than London  
to New York,*

American artists come here to confirm their reputation; Mr. Irving and Mrs. Langtry go to America not so much to confirm as to exploit, he his fame, she her notoriety. So, too, with plays. English successes are competed for with avidity by American managers; American successes are regarded with suspicion in England. It sometimes happens, indeed, that the English verdict on a play or an actor is reversed in America, just as some plays and actors succeed in London and fail in the English provinces. Nevertheless in America, as in the provinces, the approval of London carries with it a much stronger recommendation than the approval of New York or Manchester can be said to carry with it in London. The former affords a strong presumption of success, the latter (in the case of plays, at any rate) little or none. One leading theatre in New York has for years relied almost exclusively upon English plays, and very largely upon English actors. In spite of occasional reverses, Wallack's has on the whole been successful; but it would be well-nigh impossible, and certainly fatal, for any London theatre to return the compliment and rely exclusively upon American productions.

It must be admitted, then, that the centre of

production and distribution is still on this side of the Atlantic. Our actors and authors have brought home many more dollars from America than American actors and authors have taken from England. This is partly because the field is wider, and the pecuniary conditions of the American stage on the whole more favourable; but it is also because the Americans pay much more respect to the London hall-mark than we pay to the stamp of American approval.

It by no means follows from this that we are more enlightened, more refined, or in any way more truly critical than the Americans. On the contrary, our insular self-satisfaction, our egoism, our chauvinism, plays a large part in the matter. It may be hoped, as I shall afterwards point out, that the growing influence of America will tend to break down the parochial prejudice which precludes our taking any interest in events beyond our narrow horizon, or in thoughts and emotions not directly germane to our own. Meanwhile we must note that our claim to a metropolitan position in theatrical Greater Britain does not rest upon our arrogant narrowness alone, but has a solider foundation in the fact that London presents a much larger public in a given space than any American city, and has thus advantages not shared by New

*not because  
London is  
more en-  
lightened or  
more critical,*

*but because it  
presents a large  
public in a  
comparatively  
small space.*

York, Boston, or Chicago. A particular form of art has here greater space in which to strike root and develop. A London actor may be stationary; an American actor, unless he be content with a very subordinate and local reputation, must be nomadic. Thus we have here established a method in poetic drama and in comedy which the Americans may or may not admire, but which they certainly have not succeeded in rivalling on their own account. Among all the multitudinous critics who pronounced themselves upon Mr. Irving, from Boston to St. Louis, from Chicago to Baltimore, there was unanimity on one point, namely, that in stage-management, scenic decoration, and general completeness of presentation, his enterprise taught a valuable lesson. It is because he has found in the Lyceum a local habitation, with a large, intelligent, and steadily appreciative public, that Mr. Irving has been enabled to develop the method of presentation which so much surprises and delights the Americans. No city in the Union has hitherto presented the conditions which rendered this possible. Mr. Edwin Booth, an actor as intelligent as he is finely endowed, made a similar attempt in New York some years ago, which failed completely. So

*The Lyceum,  
in its way, a  
school of  
poetic drama,*

*the Haymarket  
and St. James's  
of comedy,*

too, in comedy, our Haymarket<sup>1</sup> and St. James's form between them a genuine school, with a manner, not always of the best, and a tradition, not quite of the loftiest, but still a manner and a tradition. In popular drama, again, Mr. Wilson Barrett may be said to have formed a school. Such theatres as the Lyceum, the St. James's, and the Princess's, can flourish only in a city which is a dramatic centre in a quite different sense from that in which any of the great towns of America can claim the title. Mr. Irving and Mrs. Kendal, however they may occasionally wander, are much more truly at home in London than Mr. Edwin Booth or Miss Mary Anderson in any one city of their native land; and the public among which such artists can find a permanent home may fairly, if only in respect of its numbers, claim something like a metropolitan position.

*the Princess's  
of melodrama.*

But a metropolitan position has its dangers as well as its advantages. If it favours the material development of the stage, it also fosters a spiritual narrowness. The cockney, the "boulevardier," the "ächte Berliner," is a personage of conventional ideas and narrow sympathies, forgetful in his microcosm of the

*Dangers of a  
metropolitan  
position*

<sup>1</sup> Written before the retirement of Mr. and Mrs. Bancroft.





*intensified in  
London.*

*Our insular  
philistinism*

existence of a macrocosm, and inclined to resent any call for intellectual effort, any request to put aside his own prejudices, for however short a time, in order to study the prejudices of other people. We English especially, with our deficient artistic sense and our imperviousness to ideas, have always tended towards this parochialism, which has been confirmed by our inherited habit of regarding the stage as a vehicle for mere amusement. Our forefathers held it to be necessarily frivolous and sinful; we have struck out the latter term from their definition, but have implicitly adhered to the former. An anomalous and vexatious Censorship has exercised its irresponsible powers in placing a premium upon frivolity. Everything has tended to intensify in relation to the stage the insular habit of thought from which all artistic and literary effort suffers so much. The London public has been reduced to a dead level of philistinism; and as it gives the tone to theatrical life throughout the country, playwrights had, until recently, no chance of appealing from its verdict. The very centralization which has permitted us to develop tolerable schools of acting and admirable methods of stage-management and decoration, has cramped and stunted our dramatic production.



In America, paradoxical as it may seem, the public is more European than here. It does not insist that everything shall be Americanized before it will look at it, as we insist that everything shall be Anglicized. It will accept a French statement, and even a French solution, of a dramatic problem; it will take interest in a German play without forcing it into Anglo-Saxon dress. It frequently happens that a French play is acted in two forms—in an American translation and an English adaptation—and the former is often the more successful of the two. The dramatic fare presented to and relished by the American playgoer is far more varied than the English public demands or would accept. "Our public," says Mr. Brander Matthews, "is less prudish and less prurient than yours." He might have added that its tastes are more catholic, its distastes less irrational. It does not leave its brains with its umbrella in the cloak-room; its lorgnettes are not always coloured with provincial prejudice. It is ready enough to flock after sensation and frivolity, but it is also capable of giving patient attention to serious dramatic work. In short, it is more open-minded and less self-centred than ours, more tolerant and less captious.

*not shared by  
the American  
public.*

*Influence of  
America on  
England,*

The example of America will probably tend, as dramatic intercourse becomes closer, to widen our receptivity and increase our intelligent interest in the drama of foreign nations. We may one day learn to value a French or German play in proportion to its inherent vigour and truth, not in proportion to the greater or less facility with which it can be tortured into an English form, and made to rhyme with English social prejudices and moral common-places. Already we are beginning to accept pictures of American life and character for their own sake and on their own merits. In time, America, which is becoming, as it were, a telephone-exchange for the spiritual influences of Europe, may interpret to us France and Germany, Italy and Scandinavia.

*and on the  
English  
playwright,*

And further, as the English dramatist learns to reckon upon the immense extension of his public involved in the throwing open of the American market, he will set about his work with greater freedom. He will no longer depend entirely on the prejudice or whim of one city. He will be able to appeal from narrow and exclusive England to wide and receptive America, where the Censor ceases from troubling, and the cockney reigns no more. As yet, he is scarcely aware of the

loosening of his bonds, and that for two reasons. In the first place, it is only within the last few years that judicial decisions and ingenious devices of theatrical agents and middlemen, aided, no doubt, by a more enlightened public opinion, have combined to secure the rights of English dramatists in America almost as completely as if the coming international copyright were already in existence. The full import of such a change does not make itself felt at once. In the second place, the verdict of London has still undue weight in America. A piece which has not been tried, or which has failed, here, as yet finds the American market practically closed against it. A success of esteem on this side has frequently become a money success beyond the Atlantic; but to secure a fair chance in America, a play must have met with a certain amount of acceptance here. I could name at least one English playwright whose income for some years past has been about equal to that of the Archbishop of Canterbury, the greater part of it being drawn from America; but all his pieces have been first tested in London. This state of things, however, must soon pass away. The English dramatist will enter into more direct relations with the

*only beginning  
to make  
itself felt.*

*Immense  
pecuniary  
profits of  
English play-  
wrights in  
America.*

American public, the American dramatist with the English public. Intercourse will no longer be carried on solely through speculators who, often without reading or seeing a play, take its reception in England as a sufficient omen of its American fortunes. To the English dramatist America is, as yet, a mere Tom Tiddler's ground, a "big bonanza" upon which he has chanced to stumble. As time goes on, and as the Americans develop their own resources, his disproportionate profits may decline, and he may feel the effect of American competition in the home market. But by that time he will also feel the solid and abiding gain which lies in the extension and differentiation of the audience to which he can address himself. He will go to America not merely to pick up gold and silver, but to seek his elective affinities, to find an outlet for his ideas and aspirations. In the American public he will see no mere dollar-minting machine, but a vast and varied assemblage of thinking men and women, among whom he can scarcely fail to find appreciation for his technical skill, sympathy with his literary or social convictions.

*Pecuniary profits will diminish, intellectual advantages increase.*

*May not the theatrical expansion of England*

Am I rashly anticipating in this forecast of the day when the English, or the Greater-British, dramatist shall combine technical skill

with a serious "criticism of life"? That time is certainly not yet come; but the main purpose of this essay is to inquire whether there be not a reasonable hope that the theatrical expansion of England may hasten its coming.

It is to the natural growth of things that I mainly trust—to the inevitable and gradually widening action of tendencies already traceable. But it seems to me that the altered and altering conditions of the stage may also give room for a definite new departure in theatrical enterprise—a departure for Utopia, some may be inclined to call it, when I explain my meaning. Perhaps they are right. America has furnished sites for more air-castles than were ever built in Spain, and my plan may be of the number. But voyagers to Utopia have sometimes found greater things than they sought, and a chart of the route to El Dorado may indicate a fruitful direction, even if it proposes an impossible goal.

*justify a  
definite new  
departure?*

Theorists on the drama have long told us that no great art is to be expected while management is a trade, and the theatre is expected not only to pay its way but to yield a handsome interest on capital. A theatre which must make money from day to day and from week to week can do so, they say, only by pandering to "the giddy Phrygian crowd

*Art and  
mammon  
incompatible  
yet bound  
together.*

that hastes not to be wise." They point to the great subventioned theatres of the Continent, and ask why, if the land of Molière has a Théâtre-Français, the land of Shakespeare should not have an English Theatre. Others dream of an Endowed Theatre, drawing from a fund supplied by private munificence the yearly income which, like a steady-beating propeller, shall enable it to hold its ideal course, careless of the alternate storm and calm of popular favour. There is undoubted truth in this diagnosis of the disease; the question is whether either of the remedies proposed is the right one.

*How to divorce  
them : State  
Theatre ?*

A State Theatre may be put out of the question at once. Whatever its advantages or its disadvantages in France, in England it is an impossibility, unless, indeed, we are content to await the socialistic millennium. An Endowed Theatre is not theoretically impossible, but it is practicably improbable. Its constitution and government would offer immense difficulties; and, as a matter of fact, the millionaires who turn their attention to the stage are generally more inclined to endow an actress temporarily than a theatre in perpetuity. But, short of absolute endowment, can we not conceive a theatre, or rather a wide-spreading

*Endowed  
Theatre ?*



theatrical enterprise, founded in the interests of serious art by a body of art-lovers, who should be content with a moderate interest on their investment, and should resolve to apply any surplus of profit to the extension, solidification, and perfection of their undertaking? Can we not, in short, conceive a self-supporting National Theatre? I think we can, if only our nation be wide enough—not London or England, but Greater Britain; that is to say, if we make our National Theatre truly International, not English but Anglo-Saxon.

*Self-supporting  
International  
Theatre!*

The gambler who has unlimited capital and who plays on a system must, if he play long enough, at least recoup himself. The betting-man whose operations are wide enough, and who hedges skilfully, "stands to lose" but little. So an organization of sufficient resources, appealing to a sufficiently diversified public, might keep steadily in view a certain artistic ideal and yet in the long run make both ends meet, if not considerably overlap. It is the desire to make large profits while catering for a narrow demand which cramps, if it does not degrade, private theatrical management.

Let us inquire for a moment what should be the ideal of an Anglo-American Theatre. We cannot go for our model to the Théâtre-Français,

*Its ideal: not to  
be found ready  
made in any  
foreign model.*



with its august traditions, and its rich, but exclusively French, repertory. Some German theatres might teach us apter lessons, for we are a Teutonic race, and should aim at something of a Teutonic catholicity of culture. But the conditions of our international life, literary, social, and political, are so thoroughly peculiar to ourselves, that the servile imitation of any foreign model could only lead to failure. In the first place, our store of dramatic literature is richer than that of any other people, and we, more than any other people, have allowed it to moulder in neglect. Shakespeare we have always with us, galvanized into factitious vitality by lavish decorations and the popularity of individual artists. But even of Shakespeare's works only some half-dozen can really be said to hold the stage. The rest have no overwhelmingly important star-parts, or do not adapt themselves to such decorative displays as will attract the town for months on end. It should be the first duty of a National Theatre to place the great majority of Shakespeare's plays effectively on its repertory, that is, to represent them from time to time with an efficient cast, careful stage-management, and solid, soberly-appropriate decoration. "Coriolanus," "Cæsar," "Antony and Cleopatra,"

*First vein to  
be worked :  
Shakespeare,*

“Richard II.,” “Henry IV.,” “Henry V.,” “Measure for Measure,” “Cymbeline”—all these, and others of less importance, are practically dead to us so far as stage representation is concerned. The Germans know them better than we. An Anglo-Saxon Theatre should literally “revive” them—not mount them gaudily to produce a temporary sensation, but place itself in a position to represent them adequately at certain intervals, so that no period of, say, four or five years, should ever pass without each having had its turn. Several leading German theatres have given cyclic representations of our great Anglo-Saxon epos from “King John” to “Henry VIII.”—why is such a national solemnity impossible in England and America? Nor should Shakespeare alone be unshelved. Many plays of his contemporaries would amply repay occasional presentation on the stage, and that not merely as curiosities. To do them justice, and bring into relief their elements of abiding vitality, would demand in the artistic directors of the theatre great literary taste, as well as technical skill; but there seems to be no good reason why such qualifications should not be forthcoming.

*and the  
Elizabethans.*

Pausing here in our sketch of the ideal policy

*A Shake-  
spearean  
theatre in  
London alone  
would not pay,*

of our International Theatre, let us inquire into the means of carrying out this portion of it, of doing for our national drama from Shakespeare to Sheridan what the Théâtre-Français and the Odéon do for the French drama from Corneille to Beaumarchais. The difficulty in our case is clearly much greater, for we have to deal, not with the classic, but with the romantic drama—a drama which calls for larger companies, more original histrionic talent, and more varied and expensive decorations. A large subvention would evidently be needed by any London theatre which should attempt adequately to carry out such a programme. It would demand a numerous company of competent actors, with two or three of the first order, a huge wardrobe, and a vast store of scenery. But suppose the field of operations widened; suppose the same expenditure of thought, labour, and material enabled to seek its return, not in London alone, but in one or two great provincial centres, not in England alone, but in New York, Boston, and Chicago in due succession; is it not conceivable that the interest of the Anglo-Saxon race in the treasures of its literature might in the long run yield effectual support to such an enterprise?

*but might in  
Greater  
Britain.*

This, however, is only half, or more properly

one-third, of the functions to be fulfilled by such a theatre as I conceive. It should draw the greater part of its nourishment from two other tap-roots—the drama of Germany and France, both classical and contemporary, and the actual contemporary drama of England and America. There is no possible reason why “Faust”<sup>1</sup> and “Tasso,” “Fiesco” and “Wallenstein,” should be banished from our stage. The versification of the French classic drama would render it difficult to deal with, even if its spirit were not unsympathetic; yet it is hard to see why Molière should be possible in Germany and impossible in England. Several of Calderon’s masterpieces, again, have been made genuinely attractive on the German stage—are we too hopelessly insular even to try such an experiment? But it is in the contemporary drama of France, Germany, and, I may add, of Scandinavia, that our theatre would find most material. There are hundreds of modern plays, both poetic and realistic, ill-suited to the Anglicizing now considered necessary, yet full of human interest, dramatic vigour, and valuable illustrations of the manners and modes of thought of contemporary Europe. Such plays are not so absorbingly attractive as to secure

*The second  
vein: The  
foreign drama,  
classical*

*and con-  
temporary.*

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<sup>1</sup> The “Faust” of Goethe, not of Mr. Wills.

the requisite two hundred nights' run in London alone, but should find an adequate public in Greater Britain.

*The third  
vein: The  
contemporary  
English and  
American  
drama.*

*Dangers to be  
avoided.*

In its relation to the contemporary drama of England and America should lie the highest utility of our International Theatre—the highest utility, and perhaps the greatest difficulty, for there would be two opposite tendencies to be guarded against in the selection of new plays: On the one hand there would be the temptation to make money at the expense of art, to swerve from the ideal course at every momentary gust of popular favour. On the other hand—and this would perhaps be the greatest difficulty of all—undue influence would always be attempting to procure a useless hearing for the feeble amateur dramas which now litter the manager's room in every popular theatre. It might be found necessary to establish a fundamental rule that no play by a shareholder in the undertaking, or by any one who could claim even a Scotch-cousinship to a shareholder, should on any account be accepted for representation. In the absence of some such proviso the enterprise would only too probably degenerate into a short-lived series of Gaiety matinées. This danger fairly averted, it would be the duty of the committee or committees of management to treat the plays

*All worthy  
forms of drama  
to be welcomed.*

submitted to them in a catholic spirit. Preference should, of course, be given to serious dramatic studies of modern life, but healthy farce, graceful light-comedy, powerful melodrama, should by no means be excluded from consideration. Nothing human should be held alien. Among the above-mentioned stacks of still-born plays many excellent works are probably hidden, which some fortuitous circumstance alone deprives of a hearing—an “unhappy ending,” perhaps, or weakness of “female interest,” or absence of “comic relief,” or some other peculiarity which conflicts with popular prejudice or managerial superstition. It is this class of play which our theatre should rescue from oblivion, while saving playwrights in the future from the necessity of weakening or distorting their work in deference to the said prejudice and superstition. Not that the superstition is groundless. Too much gloom, or the absence of a sympathetic love-story, is certainly not conducive to great monetary success here in London. But it should be the distinctive advantage of our international enterprise to be able to balance large receipts in one place against small receipts in another, the great success of this production against the comparative failure of that. What

*Plays now  
distorted or  
suppressed*



*rescued from  
maltreatment  
or oblivion.*

playwright has not found himself at one time or another hampered by the necessity of weaving a love-intrigue into a plot which left no room for it, breaking up a serious drama with interludes of farce, or elaborating into disproportionate prominence a part for the manager or for the leading actress? Our theatre would offer a sort of safety-valve for the relief of this pressure. Subjects naturally suited for five-hundred-night triumphs, with star parts, female interest, and comic relief complete, would still be treated after the received managerial recipe for the ordinary commercial theatres; themes which do not offer all these advantages would be handled according to their inherent capabilities with a view to more modest success on a stage which should have no room for five-hundred-night triumphs. A hundred nights of popular success are sometimes gained by the sacrifice of qualities which might have secured a hundred years of genuine vitality.

*Possible  
organization  
of the  
enterprise.*

So much for the aims of our ideal enterprise; a few words in conclusion on its means and organization. The initial capital should be subscribed in small shares—the more shareholders the better—and every effort should be used to secure an approximately equal division of the shares between the two countries. The



shareholders should elect from their own number a board of financial supervision, who, again, should nominate a committee of artistic direction, men of acknowledged eminence in literature and art, acting in conjunction with men of technical stage experience. This would be the deliberative body, which would naturally stand in close relation to a central executive authority, probably consisting of one or two individuals, selected for their organizing talent, energy, experience, and enthusiasm. The guild (if I may call it so to distinguish it from "the company" of actors) should commence operations with permanent theatres in London, New York, and at least one other American centre, perhaps Chicago. It would have to lay its account with considerable losses at first, until the initial outlay in material, &c., should be covered: until experience should ascertain the best routine of circulation between the different centres of activity: until the public should become habituated to its methods and accept it as an established institution. Its company would, of course, be very large, and should include all sorts and degrees of talent, except the overpowering individuality which no art-organism can, as it were, assimilate. There will always be virtuosos in every art, meteors

*The management.*

*The centres of activity.*

*The company.*

*Virtuosity  
excluded.*

*Temporary  
tours.*

*Incidental  
expenses might  
be minimized.*

created to whirl in an orbit all their own. It was written in the laws of nature that Sarah Bernhardt should burst the bonds of the Comédie Française; such an organization as we are imagining would scarcely give scope to an individuality like that of Henry Irving. Even talents of this order might be temporarily secured for special parts; but, as a rule, the guild should seek by long engagements, by the offer of retiring allowances, possibly by some co-operative system like that of the Théâtre Français, to secure a more or less permanent company at the lower rates of remuneration, which this very permanence would render possible. As time went on and means permitted, the centres of activity might be indefinitely multiplied; and in any case much might be expected from occasional visits of one or other branch of the company—like the memorable “Gesammtgastspiel” of the Meiningers—to cities in which no permanent establishment had been made. Expenses of transport, whether of actors or of material, would, of course, form a large item in the outlay of the guild, as in that of the great private impresarios of to-day; but even these might be minimized by means of the “special rates” at which large and continuous traffic can be conducted. Advertising

expenses, on the other hand, would be comparatively small, for it is only the individual speculator who seeks notoriety by posing at the top of columns of press-opinions. I need scarcely remark that only the actors of more or less important parts would require to make the round of this extended circuit, since each of the established centres should have permanently attached to it a body of performers trained to fill efficiently the subordinate parts in all the different classes of drama included in the repertory. The transport of scenery from theatre to theatre might sometimes be advisable, sometimes not; but in any case only one "sceneplot," one set of designs, one scheme of stage-management, would be required for any number of reproductions at the different theatres of the guild. Apart from the possibility of a special training-school under the auspices of the guild, the constant alternation of pieces could not but have a good effect upon the art of many young actors who are now exposed to the premature ossification of manner involved in the "combination" system. In the employ of an organization of such varied activity, special talent would quickly gravitate towards the style of work best suited for it. The International Theatre might not succeed in elevating

*The  
International  
Theatre as a  
training-school  
for actors.*

the standard of dramatic writing—the average of acting it could scarcely fail to raise.

*Doubts and difficulties.*

I do not pin my faith to the possibility of the scheme I have indicated, and still less to any single detail of it. My purpose has been rather to point out an opportunity of development, than to define the precise course which the development must follow. "Dreams are true while they last," says the Laureate; yet even in the very rapture of my vision I recognize two great, perhaps insuperable, obstacles to its realization. The first is the difficulty of obtaining a sufficient capital-fund on the conditions indicated; namely, that the subscribers should be content with a low rate of interest, and should allow all further profits to be devoted to the extension and solidification of the enterprise. This is absolutely essential; no theatre can serve Art and Mammon. The second obstacle is the difficulty of devising a practicable constitution for the enterprise, one which should exclude corruption and allow of harmonious co-operation between the central management and the local sub-managements. Minor difficulties will no doubt suggest themselves to every reader; while behind them all arises the great question whether, supposing all preliminary obstacles satisfactorily overcome, the enter-

*Who shall provide the capital?*

*Who shall devise a constitution?*

prise would maintain itself on a solid basis and fulfil its artistic ends. There lurks in the background of my own consciousness a suspicion that a truly successful National or International Theatre is not to be created at one stroke, but must gradually develop, perhaps from germs already existing. If this be so, it is at least well to set clearly before ourselves the probable nature and direction of this development, that we may recognize and assist it when it begins to manifest itself. The bane of our present theatrical system is that it encourages, or rather necessitates, a perpetual strain after sensational success. Between triumph and failure no mean is possible. The large capitals employed demand correspondingly large returns. A small success is merely a failure disguised. This necessity of flying at great results, whether in revivals or new productions, excludes from the stage nine-tenths of the best dramatic work of the past, while it restricts the activity of the present and affects it injuriously in every way. I cannot but hope that in one way or another our growing solidarity with America may provide an outlet from the evil groove. Mr. Matthew Arnold has recently been assuring the Americans that there is safety in "numbers," since the greater the numbers the greater is the absolute

*"Numbers"  
and "the  
Remnant."*

strength of "the remnant." Minority representation may or may not be practicable in politics; in art it is surely possible. Is it quite Utopian to predict that a theatre of catholic literary aims may one day meet with adequate support from the "remnant," not of England or of America, but of Greater Britain?

## THE PLAYS OF VICTOR HUGO.

Is it not Karl Moor in Schiller's "Robbers," *"So stirbt ein Held!"* the first and greatest of poetical bandits, the forerunner of Hernani, the harbinger of Romanticism, who compares the glories of the sunset to a hero's death? "So stirbt ein Held, anbetungswürdig," he says; and the words, which Carlyle had used on the death of Goethe, must have risen to the lips of many as the great light of Victor Hugo's life sank beneath the horizon. It had hung long on the verge, that fiery splendour, watched by half a world, and magnified for all by a mist of time, for some by a mist of tears. At last, when it seemed poised and moveless, like the sun over Ajalon, it suddenly rushed beneath the rim, while a multitudinous cry of wonder and awe went up from near and far. Worshipful it was, this strange and splendid spectacle, and he must have been a sullen scorner of the sublimities of the world-theatre who could utterly refuse to uncover and bow the knee.



*Victor Hugo  
the poet and  
patriot,*

France has scarcely yet risen from her posture of adoration. As poet and poet-patriot what services had he not rendered her! The poet-patriot does not here concern us, but the poet, as distinguished from the dramatist, meets us on the threshold of that "Théâtre de Victor Hugo" which it is my present purpose to examine. The first fact to be grasped and retained is that this writer, whatever else he did or failed to do, certainly enriched and rejuvenated the French language. It cannot be said that he found it brick and left it marble; but perhaps it is not too much to say that he found it marble and left it a mosaic of jewels. Upon the dramatic Alexandrine which had for a century been plashing with a lazy cadence like a sleepy fountain under a sullen sky, his genius fell like a rush of wind and a shaft of sunshine, breaking it up into manifold rhythmic movements, and kindling it into a thousand shifting colours. Even we Teutons, whose ears are for the most part, too gross to catch the subtlest beauties of French versification, can in a measure appreciate the change wrought by Victor Hugo; and what we cannot appreciate we must take on trust. One thing, at least, is clear: he had an unparalleled command of words. When Théophile Gautier

*the master of  
melody,*

said that if he had the misfortune to find a single verse of Hugo's bad, he would not dare to confess it to himself, alone, in the dark, he was decidedly on questionable ground; but when he proclaimed the wealth of his chief's vocabulary, he was only asserting a demonstrable fact. "Hugo," says Alphonse Daudet, "has invented a language and imposed it on his epoch." He, much more truly than George Eliot, might be called, "Quel fonte che spande di parlar sì largo fiume." On the rushing river of his rhetoric his contemporaries were swept away in a state of delighted bewilderment. Those who abandoned themselves to the spirit of the adventure found a new and unique sensation in whirling and swirling onward at the mercy of this impetuous torrent. Criticism was out of the question. Some refused to yield themselves up, and remained on dry land, reviling the flood as a lawless and formless monstrosity. These, it is clear, did not or would not understand the strange phenomenon with which they were brought face to face. Those, again, who rushed unresisting with the tide, were so absorbed in the sensations of the moment as to be incapable of unclouded perception, to say nothing of impartial discernment. In the very storm and whirlwind of

*the wielder of words.*

enthusiasm, who shall analyze the forces whereby he is rapt from the solid earth?

*Victor Hugo  
the playwright,*

This, then, is the Victor Hugo who meets us on the threshold: the conjuror with words, the master of verbal harmonies, the rhetorician and the lyrist; a vast and imposing personality, whose praise or censure must be left to other men and other times. For our part, as he himself would say, we salute the poet and inquire for the dramatist. At that word his singing-robcs fall from him, and he shrinks into much more measurable proportions. No longer a demigod, he becomes a human and quite fallible artificer in plot, character, and situation, whom we mortals of to-day may question as to his theories and appraise as to his practice.

*no longer a  
demigod.*

*Historic sketch.*

It may be well, in the first place, to recall shortly the chief incidents of the fifteen years of Victor Hugo's career as a playwright militant. The theatrical triumphs of the poet glorified are in every one's memory. The troublous times between 1827 and 1843, on the other hand, are now matters of ancient history, and, though it cannot be said that there is any development to be traced in Hugo's dramatic manner, it is nevertheless advisable to start with a clear conception of the sequence of events.

The French Revolution, which so powerfully stimulated the intellectual life of surrounding nations, at first produced a contrary effect in France itself. Between 1789 and 1815 France had no time for thought, much less for the artistic utterance of thought. Her literary development was arrested. At enmity with her neighbours beyond the Rhine and beyond the Channel, she was in no receptive mood for the new ideas and new forms which had revolutionized the Teutonic world of imagination. Anachronism apart, she may be said to have reversed the millennial process and beaten her pens into bayonets. From Beaumarchais to Victor Hugo—to put it with something of Hugonian exaggeration—French literature consisted of the “Marseillaise.”

1789-1815—  
the Mar-  
seillaise.

The Restoration threw France open to Europe and Europe to France. The invasion of Wellington and Blücher was the precursor of another invasion, gradual and insidious, but of infinitely wider issues. France now felt in the spiritual sphere the rebound of the very impetus she herself had given. Teutonism rushed in upon her on every hand, slowly at first, then with overpowering rapidity. The movement had already grown to vast proportions when Victor Hugo placed himself at its

*The Romantic  
revolt.*

head, and the Teutonic invasion became the Romantic revolt.

1827—War  
declared in  
"Cromwell."

It was in 1827 that the young author of "Odes et Ballades," "Bug Jargal," and "Haut d'Islande," published his manifesto of protest against the cold conventions in which the drama was enchained, with a specimen play of the new fashion tagged to it. "Cromwell," conceived with the idea of providing Talma with a part, had grown, after the actor's death, to quite untheatrical proportions, but it served all the better to emphasize the new departure. A gauntlet, to be thrown with effect, should be heavy enough to fall with something of a clang. Of the play and the preface more hereafter; for the present it is enough to note that Shakespeare, the "sauvage ivre" of Voltaire,

x has become in the eyes of Victor Hugo "ce dieu du théâtre." Two years and a-half later (25th February, 1830) the battle-ground was transferred to the stage with the production of "Hernani" at the Théâtre-Français. There had been a preliminary skirmish in the previous year over Dumas' "Henri III.," which had resulted in a success for the Romanticists; but Dumas had merely insinuated interest of plot (hitherto confined to the theatres of melodrama and vaudeville) into the stronghold of conven-

The battle of  
"Hernani."

tional and foreknown intrigue. He had not attempted to disturb the decorous swing of the sacred Alexandrine pendulum; he had not called a spade a spade in verse just as though it were the merest prose; above all, he had not written the preface to "Cromwell." The author of "Hernani" had committed all these enormities, and long before the curtain rose on the fateful 25th of February, it was known that worse remained behind. Victor Hugo refused the services of the professional claque, but a body of wildly-attired student-enthusiasts encamped themselves in the parterre from an early hour in the afternoon, committing indescribable breaches of decorum and filling the Classicist with disgust, the bourgeois with terror. At their head was Théophile Gautier, resplendent "in a red waistcoat and trousers of pearly grey with a stripe of black velvet"; and he was only one of many who afterwards made themselves famous. Victor Hugo has from first to last been fortunate in his claque. What need to tell of the exploits of this long-haired phalanx—how, line by line and night after night, they fought the battle of "Hernani," until they had gained for the romantic drama a firm foothold upon the classic stage? The preposterous theories of "Cromwell" seemed

*The poet's  
Young Guard.*

*Victory!*



to the demoralized Classicists to have become accomplished and deplorable facts; though in reality, perhaps, they were neither so deplorable nor so accomplished as they seemed.

*A success and  
a failure.*

X<sup>v</sup> "Marion de Lorme," written before "Hernani," but stopped by the Bourbon censorship, was produced at the Porte Saint-Martin on the 11th August, 1831, a year after the Revolution of July had removed the prohibition. It, too, attained a stormy success. "Le Roi s'amuse," played at the Théâtre-Français on the 22nd November, 1832, was, on the other hand, a stormy failure on its first night, and being interdicted on the morrow by the censorship, did not reach a second representation until its solemn revival fifty years later. The next three plays, despite the vindication of verse as a dramatic medium in the preface to "Cromwell," were written in prose. Two were produced at the Porte Saint-Martin, "Lucrèce Borgia," on the 2nd February, 1833, and "Marie Tudor," on the 6th November in the same year. The third, "Angelo," was played at the Théâtre Français on the 28th April, 1835. All these were in their way successful, in spite of determined opposition. The poet had even to resort to legal measures in order to prevent the Comédie Française from quietly shelving "Hern

*Prose plays.*



nani" and "Angelo," in spite of the fact that they drew large houses whenever they were played. An interval of three and a half years ensued, and then, at the new Théâtre de la Renaissance, founded specially as a home for the romantic drama, Victor Hugo produced "Ruy Blas," not without opposition, yet with unquestionable success. In it, and in his last play, "Les Burgraves," he returns to verse, even more flexible and sonorous than that of his earlier works. "Les Burgraves," produced at the Théâtre Français, on the 7th March, 1843, was distinctly unsuccessful, and from that time forward the poet, like Daudet's Delobelle, "renounced the theatre." He was barely forty when his career as a playwright militant came to a close.

*The return  
to verse.*

These, then, are the works we have to consider—five five-act plays and one "trilogy" in verse, three three-act plays in prose. Nine dramas in all; or eleven if we include "Inez de Castro," the firstfruits, and "Torquemada," the aftermath of the poet's dramatic labours.

It is perhaps fortunate (to vary an old metaphor) that few people enter the theatre of Victor Hugo by way of its portico proper, the preface to "Cromwell," for whatever its intrinsic magnificence, it does not fulfil the

*The portico  
and the palace.*

promise of that imposing structure. The poet, it is clear, believed himself to be raising the forefront of an illimitable palace of art which other men and other generations would continue to infinity. He did his own part manfully towards carrying out the design, but no one followed him, and the palace of art consists at the present moment of one vast hall and no more. This is a primary fact to be noted ;

*Hugo not an epoch-maker in the drama.*

Victor Hugo founded no school of dramatic writing. His plays stand isolated. They are not a link in the chain of theatrical history, French or European. They are an end rather than a beginning, the consummation and reduction to absurdity of the drama of the past, rather than the starting-point of the drama of the future. Shakespeare's influence, for good or evil, is at work to this day in the literary drama and on the stage of the whole Teutonic world. Corneille, Molière, and Schiller have stamped their impress upon the drama of generations in their own and other countries. Not so Hugo. Even Mr. Swinburne, who has paid him every other conceivable honour, has omitted in his plays the ultimate homage of imitation. Hugo's general influence as a poet upon French literature has been enormous, his specific influence as a playwright upon the

*His influence on dramatic history very trifling.*

French drama has been infinitesimal. If he had never written plays, French poetry would be greatly the poorer, and the history of Italian opera would be different; but the modern drama of Europe would, in all probability, be much as it is. Whoever uses the French language as a medium of literary expression, whether in prose or verse, owes a deep debt of gratitude to Hugo's work, and to his plays among the rest; but what modern dramatist of note, in France or elsewhere, traces his theatrical ancestry to Hugo? Neither Augier nor Sardou, neither Dumas nor Zola, neither Laube nor Freytag, neither Ibsen nor Björnson; not even Cossa, though he works a somewhat similar vein. While Hugo went about like a roaring lion seeking what he might destroy in the way of prejudice or convention, dogma or formula, a patient little insect (in point of genius and intellectual calibre the proportion holds to a nicety) was quietly building up the foundations of the new drama. Had Eugène Scribe never lived, the whole theatrical history of the past fifty years would have been different. From him, by way of imitation, development, and reaction, the modern drama springs. Had Hugo, on the other hand, held aloof from the theatre, we should simply have been the poorer

*Hugo and  
Scribe.*

by nine interesting plays, and several popular operas. Hugo invented a dialect, Scribe elaborated a technique. The dialect was not fitted for the needs of the modern theatre, the technique was.<sup>1</sup> That is why Hugo's magnificently planned avenue has proved a mere no-thoroughfare, while Scribe's modest little alley has widened into the great highway of the modern drama.

*The preface to  
"Cromwell."*

Events, then, have shown that the men who refused to see a new evangel in the preface to "Cromwell" were not altogether of the stupid party. The wonder rather is that an argument based on such questionable history and fantastic criticism should ever have passed for sound theory. Poetry, we are told, has three ages, each of which corresponds to an epoch of society. Primitive times are lyric, ancient times epic, modern times dramatic. The ode sings eternity, the epic solemnizes history, the drama paints life. The characteristic of the first is naïveté, of the second simplicity, of the third truth. The persons of the ode are colossi,

*The ode, the  
epic, and the  
drama.*

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<sup>1</sup> Even the advanced school, which rejects his technique, is nevertheless vastly indebted to the despised Eugène, just as Tennyson is indebted to Pope, though he works in metres at once simpler and subtler than the heroic couplet.

Adam, Cain, Noah ; those of the epic are giants, Achilles, Atreus, Orestes ; those of the drama are men, Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello. The ode lives on the ideal, the epic on the grandiose, the drama on the real. These three streams of poetry flow from three great sources, the Bible, Homer, Shakespeare. The poetry born of Christianity, the poetry of our times, is the drama ; the characteristic of the drama is the real ; the real results from the natural combination of two types, the sublime and the grotesque, which entwine with each other in the drama, as in life and creation. For true poetry, complete poetry, lies in the harmony of contraries. What the poet must choose is not the *beautiful* but the *characteristic*. He must steep his work in local and historical colour. At the same time he must avoid the *common*, against which verse is a powerful preservative. The idea, plunged in verse, at once becomes more incisive and more brilliant. It is iron turned into steel.

*Characteristics  
of the drama.*

These, in the poet's own words, are the dogmas of his dramatic creed — and what dogmas ! The whole literary history of the world arranged in an arbitrary pattern, so that "Cromwell" may fit into and complete it ! With his national love of order and symmetry, with

*Preposterous  
poetics.*

his individual carefulness of epigram and carelessness of fact, he systematizes all poetical effort in one preposterous scheme, and then jumps to conclusions quite independent of his premises, though in most cases equally preposterous. The real results from the combination of the sublime and the grotesque! As well say that the diamond results from the combination of any two of its facets. The characteristic of the drama is truth! Such a sentence, in the preface to such a play as "Cromwell," must be read in the light of this other sentence: "The Greek Eumenides are much less horrible, *and consequently much less true*, than the witches in 'Macbeth.'" The man who can draw such an inference clearly attaches some private interpretation to the term "true." Truth, in the ordinary sense of the word, is not predicable of gorgons and chimaeras. If he had said "much less horrible and consequently much less equilateral," the remark would have been just as instructive. It is scarcely surprising to find the "truth" of this dramatist a myth, and his "reality" a chimaera. As we review the preface in the light of the play and its successors, we are inclined to cry, with Ibsen's Julian the Apostate, "The old beauty is no longer beautiful, and the new truth is no longer true."

*What is  
truth?*



M. Zola has admirably stated the upshot of this historic preface. "Victor Hugo," he says, "had an intuition of the vast naturalist movement. He felt perfectly that the classical school had had its day, with its abstract man studied outside of nature and treated as a philosophical puppet and as a subject for rhetoric. He was conscious of the necessity of replacing man in nature, and painting him as he is, by observation and analysis. . . . But Victor Hugo brought to the task the temperament of a lyric poet, not that of an observer, a man of science. From the very outset, accordingly, he narrowed his field. Instead of emphasizing the difference between two methods, the dogmatic and the scientific, he merely marked the divergence of two literary forms, drama and tragedy." He fought the battle, not of observation against fantasy, but of unbridled against bridled imagination. He sought for effect, and called it truth.

*Zola on Hugo.*  
 ("Nos Auteurs  
 Dramatiques,"  
 p. 73.)

Let us now look at the play which is introduced, as in the Elizabethan theatre, with such a fanfaronade. "Cromwell," at a rough calculation, is about the same length as the three parts of "Wallenstein." On such a canvas it should have been possible for Victor Hugo, as it was for Schiller, to paint a living picture of

"Cromwell."



*Its plot.*

*A hopeful  
intrigue.*

even the most complex historical period; and this, indeed, is what he set himself to do, parading in his notes the authorities he had consulted, among them rare pamphlets and unpublished documents. What is the result? In the first act we find two choruses of Cavaliers and of Roundheads plotting the destruction of the Lord Protector. The latter intend simply to assassinate him; the plot of the former is more complicated and of a rare ineptitude. Lord Rochester (the author has rolled two Rochesters into one), having proved himself a fop and featherbrain almost to the point of insanity, is chosen as a fit and proper person to disguise himself as an Independent preacher, to approach Cromwell with an introduction from Milton, obtain the post of chaplain, and then drug his evening posset, so that the other conspirators may kidnap him at their ease. All this is to be effected in less than twenty-four hours; and in his intervals of leisure Rochester proposes to seduce the Lady Francis (*sic*), Cromwell's youngest daughter. The second and third acts are mainly occupied with a series of scenes, now farcical, now melodramatic, growing out of this hopeful intrigue. Here is a passage in which Cromwell soliloquizes unconscious of the presence of Rochester, who, on the other

hand, does not recognize the Protector, and mistakes him for a Royalist :—

*Cromwell—* . . . Ouvrons cette fenêtre. *Act ii. sc. 15.*  
*(Il s'approche de la croisée de Charles Ier.)*  
 L'air libre, le soleil chasseront mon ennui.

*Rochester—* Il ne se gêne pas ! on le dirait chez lui.  
*(Cromwell cherche à ouvrir la croisée ; elle résiste.)*

*Cromwell—* On l'ouvre rarement,—La serrure est rouillée.  
*(Reculant tout à coup d'un air d'horreur.)*  
 C'est du sang de Stuart là fenêtre souillée !  
 Oui, c'est de là qu'il prit son essor vers les cieux !—  
*(Il revient pensif sur le devant du théâtre.)*  
 Si j'étais roi, peut-être elle s'ouvrirait mieux !

*Rochester—* Pas dégoûté !

*Cromwell—* S'il faut que tout crime s'expie,  
 Tremble, Cromwell !—Ce fut un attentat impie.  
 Jamais plus noble front n'orna le dais royal ;  
 Charles Premier fut juste en bon.

*Rochester—* Sujet loyal ! ”

This, as Mr. Swinburne says, is certainly not “the faultless monster of Carlyle’s creation,” but it is simply the Cromwell of pre-Carlylean popular imagination, and a very little study even of the authorities available in 1827 should have shown Victor Hugo its ridiculous falsity. Rochester, it is needless to say, is discovered by Cromwell on his knees before Lady Francis, who has the presence of mind to pretend that

*The character  
 of Cromwell.*

“Messire Obededom,” as he calls himself, is begging her to plead his cause with her duenna, Dame Guggligoy (!).

*Act iii. sc. 9.* “*Cromwell (au chef des mousquetaires)*—  
Dis à Cham Biblechan, l’un des voyants d’Écosse,  
Qu’il marie à l’instant, sur le livre de foi,  
Messire Obededom et dame Guggligoy !”

So said so done, in spite of Rochester’s protestations; and it is in this interlude of outrageous and vulgar farce that Mr. Swinburne finds “Molière already equalled . . . by the young conqueror whose rule was equal and imperial over every realm of song”!

The fourth act is a passage of strong melodrama, in which Cromwell, disguised as a sentinel, foils and entraps the Cavalier conspirators who have come to carry him off; as in the fifth act, the coronation scene, he turns the tables upon the Puritan assassins. Both these passages, but especially the act at the Whitehall postern, with its ambuscades within ambuscades and its final transformation-scene, seem to cry aloud for operatic treatment. In point of local colour and historical truth they are about on the level of Italian opera. A few examples will suffice. Throughout the fourth act Cromwell’s four fools (and such fools!) are concealed spectators of all that passes. Their

names are Trick, Giraff, Gramadoch, and Elespuru; and that they may seem the more unmistakably English, we are directed to pronounce the name of the last "Elespourou." This is local colour laid on with a trowel. In the fifth act we have the following perversion of the legendary "bauble" incident. The scene is Westminster Hall, which has been arranged for Cromwell's coronation. At the last moment, however, he changes his mind, and seeing on the steps of the throne the sceptre provided for the occasion, he cries "d'une voix éclatante" :

"Quoi donc ? un sceptre !—Otez de là cette marotte. *Act v. sc. 12,*  
*(Se tournant vers Trick),*  
 Pour toi, mon fou !"

Here is the last speech of Carr, the irreconcilable Fifth-Monarchy Man, who, finding Cromwell triumphant, insists on returning to the Tower :—

"En mon cachot, peut-être, *Act v. sc. 14.*  
 Je suis le seul Anglais dont tu ne sois pas maître,  
 Oui, le seul libre ! Là, je te maudis, Cromwell ;  
 Là, tous deux je nous offre en holocauste au Ciel.  
 Ma prison ! à l'enfreindre enfin tu me condamnes ;  
 Ma prison ! Et s'il faut citer des lois profanes  
 Et des textes mondains à vos cœurs corrompus,  
 J'y retourne, en vertu de l'*habeas corpus*."

This is delicious enough; but the reply of Cromwell is more exquisite still:—

“A votre aise !—Il invoque un bill que rien n’abroge.”

Truly it is but a step from the England of “Cromwell” to the England of “L’Homme qui rit,” the fatherland of Lord Linnæus Clancharlie, of Gumdraith and Hell-kerters.

*A mixture of  
melodrama and  
comic opera,*

What has become of the great and faithful historical picture to which so huge a canvas was so solemnly devoted? We have an intrigue of melodrama entwined with an intrigue of opera bouffe—by combining the sublime and the grotesque do we not produce the real?—and we have a motley crew of Roundheads and Cavaliers, gallicized from the models provided by Scott. Certainly there is a movement, a vigour, a variety, a sonorousness, an incisiveness, a “facile force of dialogue and splendid eloquence of style” hitherto unknown in the French drama. One does not wonder that the Young France of 1827 should have gone into a passion of delight and hailed the master of this “mighty line” as the Messiah of French poetry, and even of the French drama. But when we read in the preface, “Le drame peint la vie,” and again, “Le caractère du drame est la vérité” (historical as well as typical), we

*true neither to  
history nor to  
human nature.*

cannot but ask ourselves what truth, whether of history or of human nature, is to be learned in these four hundred and fifty pages of rhetoric? "Any dullard," says Mr. Swinburne, "can point the finger at a slip here and there in the history;" true, for a *sors Hugoniana*, a random opening of the book, could scarcely fail to show some absurdity. It would be a much more difficult task to point the finger at a single touch of luminous characterization or historical truth.

It is a relief to pass from imaginary history "*Hernani*," to romantic imagination, pure and simple. To my mind "*Hernani*" stands easily first among Victor Hugo's dramas. It is his typical play, the most imposingly grandiose melodrama ever written. Mr. Swinburne places "*Marion de Lorme*," "*Le Roi s'amuse*," and "*Ruy Blas*," in "*triune supremacy at the head of Victor Hugo's plays*," and many critics, I know, agree with him in giving "*Hernani*" an inferior place. Each of its rivals has certainly some advantage of detail. "*Marion de Lorme*" is perhaps the most human and rational of Hugo's plays; but a sublime unreason is what we seek as the characteristic note of his manner. The undeniable power of "*Le Roi s'amuse*" merges into sheer repulsiveness,

*compared with  
other plays.*

which is absent from "Hernani." As for "Ruy Blas," though Don César imports into it a grateful strain of fantastic comedy, the character of its hero seems to me a radical weakness. If not in reality a more impossible personage than Hernani, he is at least more currish and contemptible. In which of these plays, again, are there any scenes of magniloquence and magnificence comparable with the third and fourth acts of "Hernani"? In which is the action so crisp, so rapid, so irresistible? It passes from suspense to surprise, from surprise to suspense, without an instant's pause. The tables are always being turned upon some one; and is not that the central secret of melodrama?

*The melodrama  
of melodramas.*

*Its action.*

The scene is Spain, the hot-bed of romance; the characters, a king in disguise, a Castilian hidalgo, an Arragonese bandit. The king, hidden in a cupboard, overhears and then interrupts a love-scene between the bandit and the betrothed wife of the hidalgo: situation First. Just as the rivals are crossing swords, the hidalgo thunders at the locked doors and enters: situation Second. He makes a noble speech, concluding thus:—

*Act i. sc. 3.*

*"Don Ruy Gomez (à ses valets)—*

*Écuyers! écuyers! à mon aide!*



Ma hache, mon poignard, ma dague de Tolède !

(*Aux deux jeunes gens.*)

• Et suivez moi, tous deux !

*Don Carlos (faisant un pas)*—

Duc ce n'est pas d'abord

De cela qu'il s'agit. Il s'agit de la mort

De Maximilien, empereur d'Allemagne.

(*Il jette son manteau, et découvre son visage caché par son chapeau.*)

*Don Ruy Gomez*—Raillez-vous? . . . Dieu ! le Roi !

*Doña Sol*—Le Roi !

*Hernani (dont les yeux s'allument)*—Le Roi d'Espagne !”

Situation Third—and what a situation ! What attitudes for all concerned ! The king, drawing himself up with a superb gesture ; Ruy Gomez passing from rage to astonishment, and then bending before his liege lord ; Doña Sol shrinking back in surprise and dread ; and Hernani couched, as it were, for a spring, his eyes blazing forth in sudden hate from the gloomy background of the Gothic chamber ! The whole theatrical art of Victor Hugo is summed up in these four attitudes. In the second act we have Hernani's sudden apparition as Don Carlos is on the point of carrying off Doña Sol, and the magnificent pose of Don Carlos, when, in opposition to Hernani's drawn sword, he simply folds his arms with the words—

✓  
*Four attitudes.*

“Je suis votre seigneur le Roi.

Frappez, mais pas de duel. . . . Assassinez-moi ! Faites !”

*Act ii. sc. 3.*

*The picture-scene.*

The third act brings with it the famous picture-scene, a passage which stirs the blood like a trumpet-blast. In semi-barbarous manners there is nothing so sympathetic and touching to the modern mind as the fanaticism of hospitality; and the action of old Ruy Gomez in calling up the great spirits of his ancestors to defend the guest who is his mortal foe, rises, surely, to the very summit of that sublime unreason in which lies Victor Hugo's force.

*The tomb of Charlemagne.*

As for the fourth act, was ever action more grandiose, speech more grandiloquent? It is the work of a melodramatic Michael Angelo. One ceases to wonder that the puissant imagination which conceived the monologue of Charles V. should be careless of fact, or should take its own inspirations for the highest order of fact. What, again, can be more impressive than the appearance of Charles V. to the awe-struck conspirators, issuing from the tomb of Charlemagne just as the three cannons are heard which announce his election to the Empire? And for sheer bravura, for splendour of sound and magnificence of pose, what can equal Hernani's revelation of his name and dignities?

*Act iv. sc. 4.*

*"Don Carlos (au duc d'Alcala)—*

*Ne prenez que ce qui peut être duc ou comte*

Le reste ! . . .

*Doña Sol.*

Il est sauvé !

*Hernani (sortant du groupe des conjurés) —*

Je prétend qu'on me compte !

*(A Don Carlos) —*

Puisqu'il s'agit de hache ici, que Hernani,  
Pâtre obscure, sous tes pieds passerait impuni,  
Puisque son front n'est plus au niveau de ton glaive,  
Puisqu'il faut être grand pour mourir, je me lève.  
Dieu qui donne le sceptre et qui te le donna  
M'a fait duc de Segorbe, et duc de Cardona,  
Marquis de Monroy, comte Albatera, vicomte  
De Gor, seigneur de lieux dont j'ignore le compte.  
Je suis Jean d'Aragon, grand maître d'Avis, né  
Dans l'exil, fils proscrit d'un père assassiné  
Par sentence du tien, roi Carlos de Castille !  
Le meurtre est entre nous affaire de famille . . .

*(Il met son chapeau—Aux autres conjurés) —*

Couvrons-nous, grands d'Espagne !

*(Tous les Espagnols se couvrent—à Don Carlos) —*

Où, nos têtes, ô roi !

Ont le droit de tomber couvertes devant toi !

*(Aux prisonniers) —*

Silva ! Haro ! Lara ! gens de titre et de race,  
Place à Jean d'Aragon ! ducs et comtes ! ma place !

*(Aux courtisans et aux gardes)*

Je suis Jean d'Aragon, roi, bourreaux et valets !  
Et si vos échafauds sont petits, changez-les !"

What sound ! What fury ! What an ineffable  
strut and pose ! Until the last remnant of  
transpontinism is purged from human nature,  
there will always be a fibre to thrill at such  
rolling rodomontade as this !

*The last act.*

Of the lyric intensity, the subtle sensuousness, the sombre horror of the last act, it is impossible to say too much. Only when the curtain falls have we time to remember that the plot is a tissue of absurdities, that our moral sense has been entirely in abeyance, that *Hernani*, *Doña Sol*, and *Ruy Gomez* are not characters, but masks, who "*traversent la pièce dans la même attitude farouche et tendre*," and, in short, that we have been assisting at a puppet-show of heroic gesticulation and high-flown sentimentality, set off by incomparably gorgeous declamatory verse.

*"Marion de Lorme."*

Many people place "*Marion de Lorme*" at the head of Hugo's plays, and I can understand, though I cannot share, the preference. It is the most possible, the least extravagant, and contains touches of genuine humanity; but without arriving at anything like truth of observation or profundity of analysis it misses the fine theatrical effectiveness of "*Hernani*" and "*Ruy Blas*." *Saverny* is one of the first instances of a type which has since become common in melodrama, opera, and fiction of the school of *Ouida*—the insouciant aristocrat, half *Sybarite*, half *Spartan*, who gains indulgence for his vices by his gaiety and courage. *Didier* is a foundling *Hernani*, sombre, lugu-

brious, intensely self-conscious, and inclined to be tedious. The treatment of Marion's own character is an excellent example of the way in which Victor Hugo moulds everything into melodrama. Dumas fils would have made of the whole theme a realistic social study tinged with his peculiar ethics; Shakespeare would have found in the central incident of the last act a problem for analysis, a variation of the motive of "Measure for Measure." Hugo finds in Marion a mere vehicle for pathetic speeches. He leaves her character vague, indeterminate. We feel neither sympathy nor antipathy in regard to her, we do not know her. We are not even asked to take up any attitude towards her, whether of praise or blame. As a woman who suffers, she cannot but command a certain measure of pity. That is all the poet requires, for it is precisely in these simple emotions, not irrational but unreasoned, that the melodramatist finds his account.

*Marion's  
character.*

"Le Roi s'amuse" is a nightmare of a play in which the changes are rung upon cynicism, lust, and cruelty, until exhausted nature cries "Hold! too much!" In Triboulet we have an instance of that "system of predetermined paradox, of embodied antithesis" (to use Mr. Myers' phrase) which has vitiated so much of

*"Le Roi  
s'amuse."*

Victor Hugo's work. He has told us how he determined to take the vilest of beings, a physical monstrosity placed in the most despicable of situations, and then to give him a soul, and place in that soul "the purest sentiment known to man, the paternal sentiment." "What will happen?" he continues. "This sublime sentiment . . . will transform before our eyes this degraded creature; the small will become great, the deformed will become beautiful." It is not thus that living character is created; it is not even thus that great effects are produced. Amid the deformities and enormities of "*Le Roi s'amuse*" a moral chaos seems to have come again. Our sympathies have no point of rest, and on the other hand we do not feel that this panorama of horrors is giving us a true insight into the dark places of the human soul. As a satire upon royalty it is scathing; as a play it is simply painful without being luminous.

*A moral chaos.*

*The prose plays.*

The three prose plays which follow in order of time bring us face to face with the melodramatist minus the poet, and allow us to estimate with less likelihood of error his mere theatrical technique. It is certainly not small. Both in the invention and in the conduct of his plots—but especially in the latter—he deserves



to rank as a master. As regards invention he has the facility and fertility which belong to the Latin races. With his machinery, indeed, of dagger, poison, and sleeping-draught, masks, secret doors, mysterious keys, scaffolds, vaults, dungeons, and, in short, the whole apparatus of mediæval melodrama, it is not difficult to invent more or less startling combinations. The difficulty is to tell the story clearly, interestingly, theatrically, making the improbable seem for the moment probable, the impossible possible. In this art Hugo, when at his best, is a master. His expositions are often admirable. He does not bring on "two gentlemen" to confide to each other the events of the past ten years, the state of parties, and the position of home and foreign politics. Three minutes after the rise of the curtain we are in the thick of the action, or if not of the action at least of the interest. In "Hernani" there is no exposition at all, in "Ruy Blas" very little. "Lucrèce Borgia" and "Angelo" open with mere conversations, but in each we see the drama germinating, as it were, shooting, flourishing, spreading abroad its fatal fronds and feelers, before our very eyes.

*Examples of  
Hugo's  
theatrical skill.*

Inspired by the name of Lucrezia Borgia, the legendary muse of melodrama, Victor Hugo has

*"Lucrèce  
Borgia."*



"*Angelo.*"

"*Marie  
Tudor.*"

connected with it his masterpiece of melodrama pure, simple, and undisguised. Not far behind it comes "*Angelo*," in which the end of the first act is unsurpassed as an example of the art of exciting curiosity. "*Marie Tudor*," on the other hand, is quite the weakest of Hugo's dramas. Its opening is slow, and its intrigue impossibly involved, though a few scenes, and particularly that between Fabiani and the mysterious Jew in the first act, are of the best melodramatic quality.

"*Ruy Blas.*"

"*Ruy Blas*" and "*Hernani*," alone of Hugo's plays, can be said really to hold the stage, and one cannot wonder that it should be so. Don César and Don Salluste, "*comedy and drama*," as the poet calls them, are figures of rich fantastic humour, and terrible, blood-curdling imagination. It is not so easy to recognize "*tragedy*" in *Ruy Blas* himself. He is full of the sublime unreason which we have recognized as the poet's most telling quality, but in his case the sublime sometimes trenches upon the ridiculous. He is a lackey not only in station but in soul; indeed, a lackey in soul more than in station, for he has only once worn the livery, whereas he habitually grovels before rank, wealth, and arrogance. Hear his confession to Don César:—

*The flunkey  
rampant.*

*Ruy Blas.*—Être esclave, être vil, qu'importe?—Écoute bien, Act i. sc. 3.

Frère, je ne sens pas cette livrée infâme,  
Car j'ai dans ma poitrine une hydre aux dents de flamme,  
Qui me serre le cœur dans ses replis ardents.  
Le dehors te fait peur ? si tu voyais dedans !

*Don César.*—Que veux-tu dire?

*Ruy Blas.* Invente, imagine, suppose,  
 Fouille dans ton esprit ; cherches-y quelque chose  
 D'étrange, d'insensé, d'horrible et d'inouï,  
 Une fatalité dont on soit ébloui !  
 Oui, compose un poison affreux, creuse un abîme  
 Plus sourd que la folie et plus noir que le crime,  
 Tu n'approcheras pas encor de mon secret.  
 —Tu ne devines pas ?—Hé ! qui devinerait ?  
 Zafari ! dans le gouffre où mon destin m'entraîne  
 Plonge les yeux !—je suis amoureux de la reine !”

One cannot but think of Mr. John Smawker and the "young missuses," with the wish that Don César had shown some of the common sense of Mr. Samuel Weller, and instead of replying "Ciel!" had said "Blagueur! va!" It is needless to point out the strange contradiction between the genius with which Ruy Blas is credited, and the childishness of his passive writhing in the very feeble toils of Don Salluste. This "sound Machiavil," in the third act, simply puts his head in the lion's mouth, and would never be heard of again but that the lion is, after all, only an ass. In "Ruy Blas,"

*Weakness of the intrigue.*

however, the lack of a point of rest for our sympathies is not so strongly felt as in some of its predecessors. There is a genuine pathos in the position of the Queen, more hapless even than Desdemona, in that she is placed not between Othello and Iago, but between Iago and Roderigo.

*"Les  
Burgraves."*

"Les Burgraves" is one of Victor Hugo's most imposing poems, but its lack of the theatrical qualities which distinguish his other works fully accounts for its failure on the stage. If "Hernani" is all action with no exposition, "Les Burgraves" may be said to be all exposition with no action. Moreover, it carries to excess that grandiosity which is dwarfed rather than realized by stage presentation. We feel this, to a certain extent, in all Hugo's plays. Our imagination can body forth more heroic figures than actors of mortal mould can present to the eye, and scenes of greater majesty and mystery than can be built up in painted canvas on any stage. Sarah Bernhardt's Doña Sol, in the last act of "Hernani," Maubant's Ruy Gomez de Silva, and Coquelin's Don César in "Ruy Blas," are the only ideal presentations of Hugo's characters which I, for my part, can remember to have seen. Mounet-Sully's Hernani and Ruy Blas, Worms' Don Carlos,

*Hugo often  
dwarfed on  
the stage,*

Febvre's Don Salluste, all fell short, and that necessarily, of the full largeness—I do not say greatness—indicated by the poet. And if we feel this in the case of these two comparatively human plays, how impossible must it be to place on the stage such gigantic figures as Hugo's Barbarossa and the Burgraves Job and Magnus! Impossible, and if possible not very profitable; for it is not the province of the stage to run a race with the imagination in realizing unreality. How unreal is the whole conception of "Les Burgraves" it needs no minute study of history to show. A glance at the poet's preface is sufficient. Scientific philosophies of history are often unconvincing enough, but this mystic philosophy of history is the very negation of science. Every personage is an abstraction, almost a symbol, and some are two or three abstractions woven together. The "mysterious powers" which govern the whole drama are "fatality, which desires to punish" (embodied in the slave Guanhumara), and "providence, which desires to pardon" (represented by the resuscitated Frederick Barbarossa). In no rational system of ethics is the task of punishment assigned to "fatality," or the mission of pardon to "providence;" but, rational or irrational, such spiritualism has no place on the serious stage. Victor Hugo reversed the

*and especially  
in "Les  
Burgraves."*

*Its philosophy  
of history:  
"Fatality—  
Providence."*

due order of things. Instead of making his drama as true as might be, and leaving its ethical issues to look after themselves, he constructed a fantastic ethical design, and made his drama fit into it.

*Melodrama  
defined,*

In the course of this study the word "melodrama" has frequently occurred, and yet I have never defined its meaning. Let me now repair this omission. Melodrama is illogical and sometimes irrational tragedy. It subordinates character to situation, consistency to impressiveness. It aims at startling, not at convincing, and is little concerned with causes so long as it attains effects. Developments of character are beyond its province, its personages being all ready-made, and subject at most to revolutions of feeling. Necessity and law it replaces by coincidence and fatality, exactitude by exaggeration, subtlety by emphasis. These I conceive to be the chief characteristics of melodrama; and, diction apart, are they not also the chief characteristics of the plays of Victor Hugo?

*and  
exemplified.*

*An apt analogy.*

The preface to "Marion de Lorme" concludes with this sentence: "Pourquoi maintenant ne viendrait-il pas un poète qui serait à Shakespeare ce que Napoléon est à Charlemagne?" We may accept the suggested proportion—as Napoleon to Charlemagne, so is Victor Hugo to Shakespeare.

## HUGO AND WAGNER.

WHOEVER writes the history of the nineteenth century drama will have some difficulty in finding their due places for two great figures which can by no means be disregarded—Victor Hugo and Richard Wagner. Neither seems to enter into the current of tendency; each appears at first sight like an eddy or whirlpool, rushing and roaring with prodigious energy, but leading nowhere. This may be said with accuracy and confidence of Victor Hugo, for time has had time to show that in his dramatic works, as drama, there was no initiative whatever. He founded no school, and the dramatic life of Europe continued its course of development practically unaffected by his doctrine or achievement. Of Wagner, on the other hand, it is too early to say that his drama, as drama, leads nowhere. The immensity of his influence on music is strictly analogous to the immensity of Victor Hugo's influence on French verse.

*Two Titans  
of the modern  
stage.*

*Hugo outside  
the movement  
of the century.*

*Wagner's  
place as yet  
undetermined.*

Each, it may be said, enriched the vocabulary and enlarged the methods of his art. But Wagner, like Victor Hugo, believed himself to be doing more than this. He believed himself to be rejuvenating the theatre; not merely producing individual masterpieces, but superseding the drama of the past and present, and founding the drama of the future. Whether in this he was right or wrong, it is as yet too early to determine; but so far as one can see, the realistic stage is proceeding on its course of development, deaf to his demonstrations of its futility and careless of his contempt for its methods. It does not seem altogether too hasty, then, to bracket Victor Hugo and Wagner as two great tone-poets (so we may call the author of "Hernani," though he did not know a note of music), each of whom produced extraordinary theatrical works according to the laws of his own individuality, believing, erroneously, that the said individuality was destined to impose its laws on the whole world of the drama. The error was not entirely one of arrogance. It arose in part from a failure to realize the fact that there is but one Victor Hugo and one Richard Wagner in an age—as though the century-plant were to undertake the whole supply of Covent Garden.



Perhaps our dramatic historian would not be far wrong in treating Victor Hugo as the prologue, Richard Wagner as the epilogue, to the drama of the nineteenth century. Hugo foresaw it, as through a glass, darkly—the glass of his peculiar, imaginative, exaggerative, effect-loving temperament. Wagner saw through it, analyzed it, and rejected it. Both were wrong; but, whereas Hugo's mistake was one of defective insight, Wagner's arose, it may almost be said, from a too great depth and sweep of vision. It was a splendid, a fruitful, an inspired error.

*The prologue  
and the  
epilogue?*

In their different attitudes towards truth, towards reality, we may best study the difference between the two men. Victor Hugo, as we have seen in the foregoing essay, is all for truth. The preface to "Cromwell" proclaims this clearly. After much theorizing about primitive times and ancient times, the ode and the epos, Adam, Cain, and Noah, Achilles, Atreus, and Orestes, we arrive at the conclusion that the drama is the special literary form of modern times, and that its function is to "paint life." This is insisted on emphatically, antithetically, epigrammatically. The characteristic of the ode is naïveté, its personages colossi, it lives in the ideal; the characteristic of the epic is simplicity,

*Hugo's  
"truth,"*

*theoretically  
realistic,*

its personages giants, it lives in the grandiose ; the characteristic of the drama is truth, its personages men, it lives in the real. This is perfectly explicit ; Zola himself could not be more so. But what sort of truth is it that this flourish of trumpets announces ? An England of opera-bouffe with a Cromwell of popular legend ; fantastic Spanish bandits and lackeys, dons and duennas ; an Italy of daggers, poisons, secret doors, and subterranean passages ; and a Germany of fabulous colossi growing out of a background of chaos and old night. <sup>1</sup> Even the two plays which pass on French soil, if they have slightly greater claims to historical and human reality, are at bottom mere pieces of theatrical rhetoric without a touch of observation.

*practically  
fantastic.*

Thus our sublime prophet of truth and reality resolves himself into a falsifier of history, a derider of possibility, and a fabricator of eloquent lay-figures in place of living and observed characters. So far from laying the foundation-stone of a new, true, and vital drama, he merely provides a quarry for the librettists of Italian opera.

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<sup>1</sup> It is curious to note that about the time when Hugo was writing "Les Burgraves," Wagner was contemplating a music-drama which should have Frederick Barbarossa for its hero. A Wagnerian might maintain, too, that Hugo, in this his last play, had burst the bonds of the spoken drama, and was crying aloud for the wings of music.

What now is Wagner's attitude towards truth? He, too, rebels against mere convention and untruth, but he is not, like Hugo, content to substitute a new for an old falsity, his own fantasy for other people's conventions, and call it truth. On the contrary, so vivid is his perception of the multiplex difficulties in the way of truly reproducing the simplest phenomenon under the conditions of art, that he despairs of reality and would confine the drama of the future to the sphere of pure imagination, where typical, symbolic, spiritual truths can alone be presented, truths cognizable by the feelings rather than by the senses and the intellect. A realistic historical drama he declares to be impossible, because historical character can only be understood by the aid of an exact and careful delineation of its circumstances and surroundings, which is precisely what the very conditions of his art debar the dramatist from attempting. The romance alone, he says, can deal with history, for it proceeds mechanically from the outside inwards, while the drama develops organically from the inside outwards. A realistic modern drama, again, can only end, he argues, in a chaos of formless ugliness, quite foreign to art. Modern society is such a distortion and contradiction of the

*Wagner's  
"truth,"*

*essentially  
symbolic and  
spiritual.*

*His rejection of  
the historic  
drama,*

*and of the  
drama of  
modern life.*

true social order that art shrinks from it as from an unclean thing. Only by presenting humanity in its simplest, most elemental aspects, appealing not merely to the intellect with word-speech, but to thought and feeling in one by the aid of tone-speech, can the drama, the great harmonious art-work of the future, become and remain a living reality.

*Wagner the  
profounder and  
more luminous  
thinker.*

This is, I own, a very incomplete and even unfair statement of Wagner's position. I cannot pretend to compress into one paragraph a body of beliefs set forth in several volumes and illustrated in half a score of titanic artworks. Wagner bases his prophecy of the future upon an analysis of the political and æsthetic history of the past which cannot be fairly studied except in his own writings. Nevertheless, enough has been said to show that his view of the problem and its issues was far profounder than Hugo's. He was misled by *a priori* conceptions of "art," "beauty," "ugliness," and so forth, but he was far above the radical error of Hugo's system—that of being content with an *a priori* conception of truth. The difference between the two men is curiously typical of the difference of their nationalities. Hugo, as Lord Tennyson has aptly, if not very profoundly, remarked, was

"French of the French," Wagner was German of the Germans. Who knows but that it may be the first task of the true creator of a living modern drama to eliminate from his methods, not the personal equation, but the "race equation"?

Both Hugo and Wagner, it is important to remember, thought and wrote before the great problem of modern æsthetics—the relation of Science to Art—had fairly formulated itself. They were insensible to the electric current which is thrilling the world of thought, polarizing all its particles and arranging them in novel curves and new relations. Wagner, towards the close of his career, tried to bring his theories into harmony with a metaphysic which, of all similar systems, has the best claim to a scientific sanction; but whether his attempt was successful or not, the system remains a metaphysic, and the harmonization remains an afterthought. It is possible that if these two great men had lived a generation later, Hugo would have attached a different meaning to the word "truth," and Wagner would have recognized in the realistic drama a means, and a more essential means than that in which he trusted, towards the great end he had in view. There was a third great man of their contem-

*The great  
problem: the  
relation of  
Science to Art.*

*Schopenhauer,*

poraries whose name both must have heard, but whose thought it did not occur to either of them to bring into relation with his own. That man was Darwin.

### THE REALIST'S DILEMMA.

THE word "Realism" has occurred more than once in the foregoing studies, and has sometimes been opposed to "Idealism." A friend who has been good enough to go over the proofs with me, rejects the antithesis, and ridicules the words, asking me to define what I mean by them. This I studiously abstain from doing, for the very good reason that I do not use them in any definite, but in a perfectly general, sense. Were I constructing an æsthetic system, I should try to formulate the concepts designated, *in* that system, by these, and many similar, terms. As it is, I believe that the words, taken in their context, sufficiently suggest to the impartial reader those general notions which I design to convey. One may surely speak of Defoe as a realist and of Spenser as an idealist without being called upon to set forth in detail the connotation of the two terms. The remark would be neither luminous nor novel,

*Realism and  
Idealism—a  
true antithesis?*

*The terms used  
popularly.*



but it would convey a certain meaning to the reader's mind. Similarly one may oppose the realism of the third act of "Othello" to the idealism of "As You Like It," the realism of Augier to the idealism of Hugo, without perpetrating an altogether false antithesis. There may be refinements of æsthetic theory whereby the classification is overset, and even reversed, but one is surely justified in using common words without ceremony in their popular acceptation.

*A formidable  
dilemma :*

The scornors of realism—for it is always the "apriorists" who object to the term as to the thing—are in a stronger position when they give up verbal cavillings and ask: What is your criterion of reality? Supposing realism possible in art, how are you to recognize it? Like Zedekiah, the son of Chenaanah, they arm themselves with iron horns (of a dilemma) and say, "With these shall I push the Realists until they be consumed." The dilemma may be formulated somewhat after this fashion: Either you are familiar with the thing represented, or you are not; in the former case you learn nothing, and have merely the childish pleasure of admiring on the stage the real pump which you see every day in your own back yard; in the latter case you have no means of

*Why represent  
the familiar?  
How recognize  
the unfami-  
liar?*

testing the truth of what you see, and must simply take the word of the author or actor, who, for aught you know, may be as ignorant as yourself. Some may answer (I have done so myself in my time), "We know this or that to be true, because it is vivid, irresistible, in short convincing;" but this is a woman's reason, a mere restatement of the difficulty. "Why is it convincing?" the adversary may demand to know. "Because it seems probable? Do you not know that the improbable always happens, and that truth is stranger than fiction? Or do you maintain that you have an intuitive perception of truth in questions of character and manners, as some thinkers hold that we have an intuitive perception of geometrical relations? If so, I part company with you finally, for you claim a faculty which I regard as supernatural. Your test of truth must rest on a basis of experience, or I will have none of it." Quite so—nothing more reasonable; yet I propose to take this dilemma by the horns, hoping to show that it is not so formidable as it seems.

*Experience must be the test of reality—agreed.*

In the first place, realism is a relative, not an absolute, term. It indicates a tendency rather than a consummation, approach rather than attainment. Without asserting that this or that is absolutely, literally, photographically

*Preliminary explanation: Reality comparative, not necessarily absolute.*

*Prose (in the  
drama) more  
real than verse,*

*and plain  
English more  
real than per-  
petual pun-  
ning.*

real, we may often say, with the full sanction of experience, that it is more real than something else. Many things to which we are accustomed on the stage are notoriously *unreal*. We know, for instance, that people do not, and never did, talk blank verse. I say nothing of the value of blank verse as a medium of dramatic expression, nor do I deny that there may be much realism in a blank-verse play; I merely note that as we all, like M. Jourdain, talk prose, a play in prose has, or may have, one element of reality which a blank-verse play cannot have. Again, it is quite clear that the ordinary conversation of average men does not consist entirely of puns; consequently, the works of the late Mr. H. J. Byron cannot be realistic so far as their dialogue is concerned. It is quite open to the realistic dramatist to depict one punning character, or two, or three, since the irrepressible punster is a not uncommon social nuisance; but to represent the whole of the English middle-classes as conversing exclusively in puns is burlesque, not realism, and a comedy containing only the average proportion of word-plays which we hear in the light conversation of the day is, in that respect, more realistic than "Our Boys." These are extreme instances, but they illustrate

my meaning. Between the purely fantastic and the entirely realistic (if either of these extremes can be said to exist) there are many gradations, the more marked of which it needs no vast experience to distinguish. We may not be able to decide whether Mr. Grundy's Dodson Dick in "The Silver Shield" is an absolutely true and typical manager, but a very small and superficial knowledge of the theatrical world enables us to say with certainty that he is a truer and more closely observed sketch of an existing, or recently extinct, type, than the outrageous Crummleses with whom we sometimes meet in fiction and on the stage.

But this is merely a preliminary consideration. Realistic art claims to effect more than a rough approximation to truth, and if we are to judge its claims we need a much finer test than ordinary common-sense. Let us look more closely at the dilemma as stated above. If you are familiar with the thing represented (so says the first alternative) you learn nothing; why pay prices ranging from one shilling to £3 3s. to see a real pump such as you can see every day in your own back yard? This seems plausible, but is there not a fallacy lurking somewhere? Even in the extreme case of the real pump, may we not learn something by the

*The dilemma  
faced.*

*The first horn.*

*The most  
familiar  
things but half  
known,*

mere fact of seeing it in a new light, and having our attention concentrated on it? We may see it every day for nothing from our second-floor back window, but seeing is one thing and observing is another. When we pay £3 3s. to see it from a private box, we not only see, we observe. This principle holds good not merely in the case of real pumps but of real men and women. Our knowledge of our nearest neighbours is vague, unformulated, and, as it were, inarticulate. It consists of half-conscious half-observations, for the most part half-forgotten. The dramatist (and I might add the novelist and the painter, were not the drama our immediate theme) by placing an observed type before us under circumstances which force us to concentrate our attention upon it, stimulates our memory, formulates our observations for us, and makes us fully and intelligently conscious of experiences which have lain vague and inarticulate in the limbo of semi-consciousness. The eyes of the average man (his mind's-eye included) are to the eyes of the artist as a baby's eyes to an adult's. They see hazily, unnoticingly, unintelligently. The picture is there on the retina, but it becomes blurred and indefinite before it reaches the consciousness. It is one of the functions of

art to sharpen these perceptions. It presents the commonest objects to us—an old woman's wrinkled face, a barge on a muddy stream, a lawyer's clerk reading a newspaper, in fine, a real pump of any description—under conditions which stimulate our faculties and concentrate our attention; and, behold! these commonplace things leap into new clearness and undreamt-of significance. The touch of nature which makes the whole world kin does not convey new information but awakens latent memories. The real pump is made interesting, not by being idealized into a "fountain gushing forth i' the midst of roses," but by simple presentation in the focussed light of imitative art. The most familiar things exist in our consciousness as in an undeveloped negative; artistic presentation is like the developing "bath." Do we not sometimes find a revelation in a photograph of our dearest friend?

So much for the first horn of the dilemma; let us now face the second, and show that even in matters with which we are not familiar, we have, in many cases, a valid criterion of reality.

We may put aside at once those questions of external detail on which, in the absence of complete knowledge on our own part, we must simply rely upon the knowledge and veracity of

*and transmuted into something new and strange by artistic presentation.*



*The second horn.*

*External details to be taken on trust.*



the artist. If a novelist lays his scene in Timbuctoo, those of us who have not been there must clearly take his word for the local colour and the manners and customs of the Timbuctovians. If we know that he has had good opportunities of observation and has proved himself, in other cases, capable of making good use of such opportunities, we have no difficulty in accepting his picture as probably accurate. Similarly, when Zola in "La Curée," shows us the jobbery and robbery, the scheming and struggling and grasping and grabbing, that accompanied the Haussmannizing of Paris under the Second Empire, most of us, who did not happen to be behind the scenes of French society at the period depicted, believe or disbelieve in his picture according as we believe or disbelieve in Zola's ability and honesty. It would be easy to give a hundred other cases. An artist is often in the position of a traveller in unknown countries; we must judge by the consistency of his narrative and by his truth or falsity in matters in which we are able to put him to the test, whether he is, on the whole, bringing back travellers' tales or faithful reports. But this refers almost entirely to mere externals, to local colour, manners and customs, descriptions of things conventional or inanimate,

*The artist a specialist—his evidence to be tested by the ordinary rules of evidence.*



When we come to questions of human nature, it is only its fringes and trappings, its eccentricities and abnormalities, that we must or should take on trust. Those of us who have not been to Russia, or lived among Russians, must accept as matters of faith Turgénjew's descriptions of Russian scenery, social habits, and even eccentricities of character; but when he deals with the fundamental and typical things of human nature, when he paints a Basaroff, or Neshdanoff, or "King Lear of the Steppes," we are not content to accept his authority, but claim to judge for ourselves whether he draws truly or falsely. Yet none of us, it is pretty certain, has ever been in just the situation of his Basaroff, or Neshdanoff, or King Lear, or has ever observed any person or persons so constituted and circumstanced. Whereon, then, do we ground our claim? Is it an illusion founded on a fallacy? or have we indeed a rational test of truth in things beyond our immediate ken?

*It is on the fundamentals of human nature that we lay claim to a personal test.*

Here we are at the very centre of the problem. If we have no such test of truth, the realist's wings are clipped, and he must resign himself to a grovelling imprisonment in the narrow field of absolute personal experience. Autobiography, with sketches from the outside

*The centre of the problem: if no test is possible no art is possible.*

of "Men I have known," is the only style of work which a "truthist" (as the Italians put it) will venture to attempt, and in which a rational reader will put the slightest faith. For the impossibility of criticism necessarily implies impossibility of production. It is not probable that Shakespeare ever went through the actual experiences of Othello any more than the most humdrum of his readers; the play, then, must be a work of pure fantasy, since, if actual experience be the reader's sole test of truth, it must still more clearly be, for the writer, an essential preliminary of truthful representation. The same reasoning applies to Becky Sharp, to Madame Bovary, to Numa Roumestan, to Tito Melema. None of these characters can be vouched for by the author's actual experience or analytical observation. Are we wrong, then, in classing them unhesitatingly as real characters? Are they merely creatures of the authors' imagination, which, if true, are true by chance, and if false, are more misleading than the puppets and lay-figures of the most fantastic romance, by reason of the very illusion of reality which they somehow manage to create?

*Ethical realism.*

We shrink, and justly, from such a conclusion. The fallacy lies in assuming that an experience,

to afford the test of truth, must be a complete and, so to speak, an acted-out experience. Of ethical realism, such as that of George Eliot, we have a very practical test in our often unformulated but none the less trustworthy self-knowledge. To our friends and enemies, to the law and the state, to the policeman, the tax-collector and the gravedigger, each of us is a unit, an integer, one individual; but in our own moral consciousness we are "not one but all mankind's epitome." Our spiritual life is a battle, not of two tendencies, as in Mr. Stevenson's impressive "Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," but of a thousand potentialities. A few of these get the upper hand, realize themselves, and, becoming actualities, constitute a man's moral nature as known to the world. It is no mere theological figment but a psychological fact that the visible saint and martyr is the result of a victory over the murderer and the lecher, the fop and the sybarite, who are kept out of sight and, so far as possible, out of mind. The converse does not commonly hold—to suppose so would be to go to the extreme of pessimism and suppose reversion to lower types as general as progression to higher—but in every higher development may be traced the rudiments and potentialities of

*tested by the  
experience of  
our inner*

the lower stages. Therefore it is that our inmost fibres thrill with a sense of recognition when we are brought face to face with Hetty Sorrel, Tito Melema, Rosamond Vincey, Grandcourt, or Gwendolen Harleth; and it is therefore, perhaps, that in the case of the higher types, of Maggie Tulliver, and Romola, and Dorothea, our sense of recognition is less vivid, our belief in their absolute truth less confident. When some curious impertinent asked George Eliot whether she drew Casaubon from George Henry Lewes, she pointed to her own breast and said, "I found him here." It is because we, too, find him in the very texture of our moral consciousness that we believe in his reality.

*Physiological  
and patholo-  
gical realism*

The ethical realism of George Eliot (though she never lost touch of nerve and tissue) is a simpler matter than the physiological and pathological realism of Balzac, Flaubert, and their French followers. In their case, too, introspection provides a test of truth, up to a certain point; beyond that point, another principle comes into play. Their characters, where they are thoroughly successful, explain, complete, and range under general laws the fragmentary observations which every thinking man on his passage through life is consciously

or unconsciously storing up. This trait or that imprints itself upon our memory like a segment of a curve; when in Flaubert or Zola we find the figure completed and its formula clearly set forth, shall we not say, "This is true, this is real"? Character is organic, not an agglomeration or a patchwork. From a foot we infer Hercules, from two or three vertebræ we reconstruct a mammoth or a mouse. All of us, as we stumble through life, pick up from time to time such fragments and "disjected members." The realistic artist fits them into their organic wholes for us; and when we see that they dovetail, we are satisfied, not irrationally, that these wholes are not figments of fantasy but products of nature.

*completes, explains, and coordinates our fragmentary experiences.*

Therefore, as it seems to me, the second horn of the dilemma is no more fatal than the first to the theory of realism. It may be a low form of art; it may even be no art at all, merely "jejune science," as a contemptuous critic once said of George Eliot's later manner; but, art or no art, it is neither a futility nor a countersense.

*Conclusion: realism possible.*



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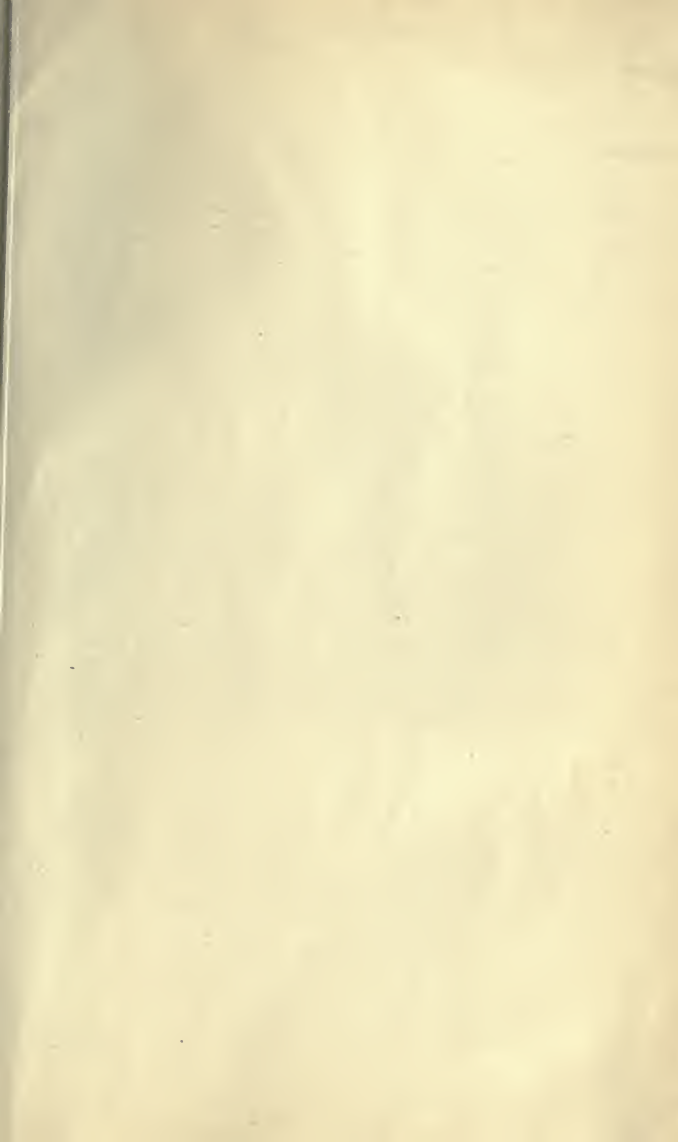
*Young Admiral, The*, 105.

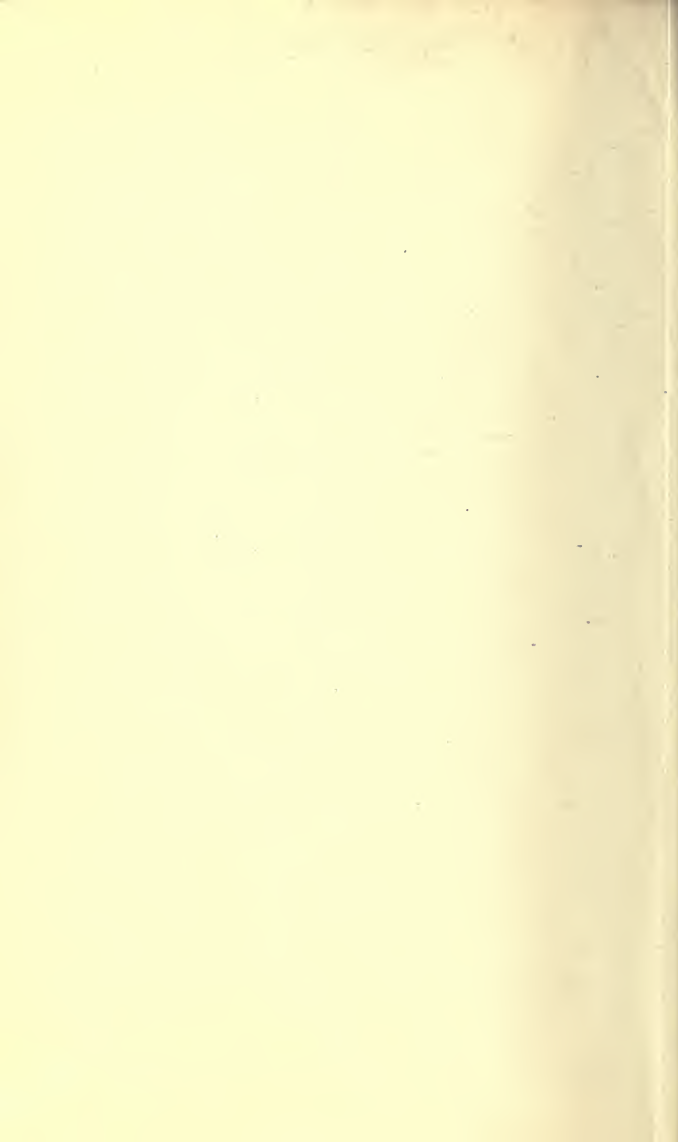
*Young Mrs. Winthrop*, 43.

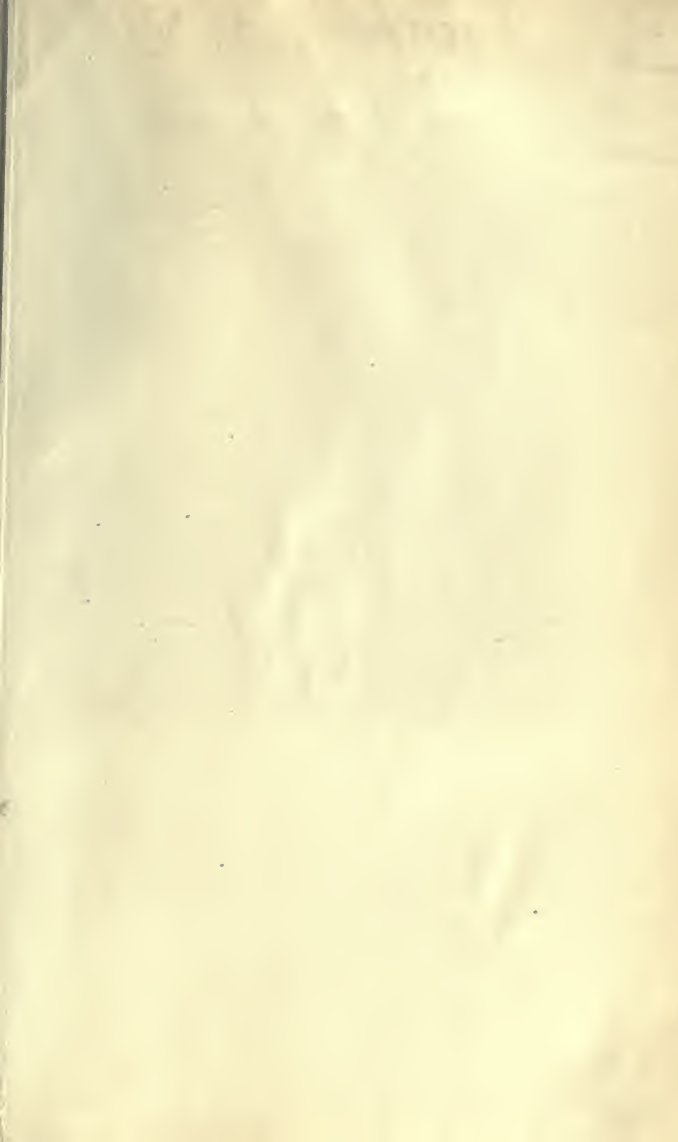
Z.

ZOLA, E., 2, 42, 71, 195, 297, 301,  
336.









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